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July 6, 1880.

No. 34. VOL. II.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, 98 WILLIAM ST., N. Y.

PRICE, 5 CENTS.



"DEAR GASTON, HOW GOOD HE IS TO ME!"

A Marriage of Convenience; or, Was He A Count?

BY SARA CLAXTON.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE RIVER.

It was an evening in early autumn. The sun had sunk to rest, and the pale crescent moon gleamed with a silvery light on the broad bosom of the Seine, and glittered on the old towers and gabled roofs of Honfleur. It had been an intensely hot day, but now a damp, chilly breeze from the

sea began to blow, as I, Lois Clinton, together with my friend and playmate, Claude Warrenne, and Pierre, the boatman, rowed vigorously against tide and current, to gain the quaint old pier, that he saw lying still and gray in the moonlight, a couple of miles ahead of us; for, with the incoming tide, he knew that the great bank of fog, stretching across the bar like a thick, white wall, reaching to the skies, would overtake and envelop us, and that then our return would be difficult, if not dangerous.

"It's no use, Lo," said Claude, after a while, laying down his oar, while Pierre stopped pulling also, with an exclamation of disgust; "it's no use our working our lives out like this. Let's set the sail; it will, at any rate, keep us from going backward; and then wait till the tide turns—it won't be long."

"But it's so late," I reply; "and Alida will scold so!"

"Hum! well! let her scold," returned Claude, defiantly. "Colonel Clinton will not be angry, will he?"

"What?—who?—papa?" I reply; "as if he ever knew or thought about my comings and goings, Claude! No; aunt Gertrude will say, 'Lois, my dear child, is this the hour for a young lady to be out on the river? Come and take some tea, love; and then add up these accounts for me.' But Alida—you know what she is!"

"Yes, I know, Lo; a fine young lady—very handsome, and rather bad-tempered," replied Claude, laughing.

"Perhaps," I answered, rather reluctantly. "Yes; she's certainly very handsome, Claude. I wish I were more like her;" and I thought of my black eyes, and shaggy brown locks, and sunburnt face, and snub-nose, and looked at my plump, tanned, and blistered paws; and thought of my sister's straight nasal organ, blue eyes, perfect complexion, and exquisitely-formed hands, with a feeling akin to envy.

"Well," said Claude, in a comforting tone, and with a schoolboy frankness, of which his twentieth year had not robbed him; you're not much to look at, Lo—beside Alida, that is, I mean—but, for all that, I shouldn't like you to be like *her*. By Jove! I should be quite afraid of you; and as to asking you to come out fishing with me—never again, my dear! But never mind your looks; you'll improve as you grow older. Why, you're only sixteen! and Alida's older than I am, Lois!"

"Seventeen, if you please, Claude; or I shall be in a day or two," I reply, with dignity. But Claude's laugh at my air of importance is cut short by a gust of wind that fills our sail, and makes our little boat heel over. Pierre takes the helm, and I and Claude look anxiously seaward.

The lights of Havre are quite hidden by the fog, which comes silently and swiftly rolling up the river. Already stray wreaths of white vapor stretch their long arms above us, and in a few minutes more we are enveloped in mist.

Pierre utters an unintelligible exclamation. "We must be on our guard," he says; "the sand-banks here are numerous and dangerous."

How strange, and solemn, and deathlike the silence around us seemed as the white vapor slowly infolded us in its embrace, broken only by the rippling of the water against our bows, as we glided cautiously along through the mist straight ahead of us; but a vigorous turn of the rudder from Pierre's strong hand saved us, and slowly we proceeded on our way again. Suddenly the sounds of distant voices fell on our ears—we were approaching some other boat. We shouted, but there was no responding cry; only the voices were raised higher in angry tones. There were oaths and curses, then blows, and a cry, and all was silent; and the fog seemed to settle down on us more densely than ever.

My blood ran cold, and I caught hold of Claude's arm as if for protection.

I looked in his face. His eyes, and the eyes of Pierre, were steadily fixed ahead of us.

Both looked anxious.

Suddenly there arose a warning shout, and close to us, on our right, we perceived a large boat, filled by a motley crew, gliding by us.

Just at this moment the fog parted a little, and the pale, cold beams of the moon fell on the boat and on the faces of its fierce, ruffianly crew, lighting up their dark, angry features with its steady rays.

They rowed desperately, as if hastening from the pursuit of some foe, looking back at us with suspicious glances, as our little boat—caught by the now swiftly incoming tide, and her sail filled by the rising breeze—sped onward.

Claude gave a sigh of relief as she shot ahead, and Pierre's rugged face expressed unwonted satisfaction.

"Who are they, Pierre?" I asked.

"Who? I can't say, mademoiselle; but the

river is infested with ruffians. And they were a horrid, ill-looking set!"

"Glad we are well past them, Lo," remarked Claude. "They have been after no good, I'll venture to say! Do you remember that cry?"

I shuddered.

"They did not seem inclined to annoy us," he continued. "They had done their work, I guess, and I dare say before midnight will be far away on the high seas. Ah, how the wind has fallen again. We shall be terribly late."

And I thought of Alida's wrath, and trembled a little, and for some moments we were silent.

Again the mist rose, and the moon lit up the scene; and to the left, almost in the center of the river, we perceived a large sand-bank—black, bare, and desolate—stretching itself out in the moonlight, as if it were some gigantic water-reptile asleep in its native element.

I looked at it awhile with careless eyes, wondering how near to it Pierre would steer us, when a sudden thrill of terror shot through my breast.

What was that white, still form that lay on its bank, up which the cold, dark waters were rapidly creeping?

"Claude!" I whispered; "look!—look!"

And I pointed to the object.

He looked. His eyes were as piercing as those of a young eagle.

"Heavens!" he cried—"a body!—a man!"

Pierre gazed eagerly forward.

"*Sapristi!*" he cried; "the villains! That cry, Monsieur Claude!—their work, I'll wager!"

"He may be alive yet!" I whispered.

"Claude, we must endeavor to save him!"

And already Pierre was steering as near as he dared to the treacherous sand-bank.

"How the water rises! Closer, Pierre—closer, or he will be swept away before we can reach him!" I cried.

And already the dark, swift waters were bathing the feet of the body.

"Impossible, mademoiselle!" replied Pierre, firmly. "I dare not go closer. We should strike, and be lost ourselves."

"But we must not leave him!" I cried. "It would be shameful, cowardly! But—but, Claude, what is it you are going to do?"

And I started up, for Claude had quietly begun to divest himself of his coat, waistcoat, and boots.

"I will swim to the bank and bring him off. Give me that rope, Pierre," he said, calmly.

Pierre looked aghast.

"Beware, monsieur!" he said. "You are a good swimmer, I know; but the current of the Sienne is strong. If you were dragged under—"

"No fear, Pierre! See; I will take the rope so. Cheer up, Lo, and hold on to it tight if I sing out."

And, without a word more, Claude plunged into the black waters.

He was a first-rate swimmer, as I knew, and in a few moments was beside the body.

We saw him kneel down, lay his hand on the chest, and raise the head, and then he gave a shout, and we knew that our labors had not been in vain—that the man still lived.

Cautiously and slowly, Pierre brought our little boat as near as possible to the bank, and Claude fastened a rope round the still insensible form, and with it plunged again into the water.

It was a hard struggle, good swimmer as he was, to bring the inert body to the boat's side. How he battled with the waters—how the relentless current, spite of his efforts, carried him back; but the tide was in his favor, and he succeeded; but when, at last, Pierre and I got a firm hold of the body, and Claude climbed into the boat, he sunk thoroughly exhausted at the bottom.

With infinite caution and difficulty, Pierre and I raised the body, and placed it in the boat.

"Here is brandy," I cried, producing a flask, and giving some to Pierre, who tried at first

in vain to force it into the stranger's tightly-closed mouth; while I administered a dose to Claude, who, quickly reviving, assisted in administering restoratives to the insensible man.

"Ah!" cried Pierre, starting, as he cast his eyes on the arm with which he had been supporting the stranger's head; "foul play! See!"

And I saw that the sleeve of his jacket was soaked with blood. The man had been desperately wounded; a long, deep cut crossed the back of his head, and blood began to trickle from a stab in the arm.

"Who could have done this? We must get home at once, Pierre," cried Claude; "my father will look after him. More brandy. Give me your handkerchief—that apron—anything, Lo. See, I will bind up his wounds. I'm not a doctor's son for nothing, though I've no taste for the trade."

And deftly he bound up the wounded head and arm.

The man sighed once or twice; then opened his eyes and looked wildly around, raising his arm as his eyes fell on the two men, as if to guard against a blow.

"Mercy, mercy!" he muttered; "do not murder me! Jean, Rene, help! My old comrades, do not desert me! It is false! Mercy!"

I looked anxiously into his face, and, as his eyes fell on mine, a change came over it—a look of terror.

"You here—you! How did you come here, Madelon?" he muttered.

"I am not Madelon," I replied—in my agitation, speaking in English; and as the sound of my native tongue fell on the man's ear, a look of astonishment took the place of the look of fear, a light seemed to break on his stunned senses, and, in a weak voice, he whispered in the same language, "Where am I? What has happened?"

"You are safe, sir," replied Claude, "but you have had a narrow escape. If we had not found you, you would have been half-way to the bar by now."

And, looking back, I perceived that the sand-bank on which we had discovered the man had been entirely swallowed up by the waters, which now rolled calmly and smoothly over it.

He did not answer, and while he lay still and quiet at the bottom of the boat, his head pillowed on my cloak, and the moon shining down on his pale face, I took a careful survey of his countenance.

What could he have been doing among the ruffianly gang of wretches who had passed us in such a fierce haste an hour ago? This man was no one of them—at least, not by birth or bringing up. No; he was, to all appearances, a gentleman—in age, not more than five-and-thirty, I thought; and, as I examined his features, they seemed to me to be perfect. He was tall and strongly built, and his crisp, black hair clustered round his well-shaped head and oval face. He had spoken English with a pure accent, but the face was not an English one, nor the voice.

Suddenly the eyes opened, and fixed themselves on mine. I almost started; they changed the whole face, and I wondered how I could, for a moment, have thought it beautiful as I had done. There was something curiously low, cunning, and cruel in the dark, lustrous orbs, that made me, for the moment, absolutely shudder; and yet, in another moment, the impression passed away, and I found myself admiring the exquisite contour of the sharply-cut profile again.

I saw Claude's gray eyes watching me with a curious expression.

"An Adonis, don't you think?" said he, in a half-mocking tone. "What will Alida say now?"

I shook my head, and half blushed. I didn't particularly love Alida at that time, though she was my sister—Heaven forgive me!—but I never could endure even Claude to allude to her habit of flirting.

"Alida! why should she trouble herself about him?" I answered, coldly.

"Well, I don't know, Lois, but Alida does generally trouble herself about handsome fellows, and this one is likely to be on our hands for some time, I fancy. It will be a nice amusement for Alida nursing and making much of him!" laughed Claude.

"Indeed!" I replied; "I don't think nursing is much in Alida's way. We have enough of it with poor papa, you know; and I think, without exaggeration, I may say that aunt Gertrude and I do nine-tenths of it. Alida doesn't care to be shut up in a sick-room. I expect that aunt and I will have to look after him." And I glanced rather ruefully at the pale, handsome face before me.

"Nay, Lo; don't distress yourself," replied Claude, mischievously. "I feel sure Alida's mercy for this poor invalid will be very tender."

I turned away my head with an impatient gesture.

Claude dropped his bantering tone at once.

"Do I offend you, Lois? Beg your pardon, my dear child? I was only laughing at Alida and her little ways; but I'll stop if it annoys you. Come, cheer up, Lo!"

"Oh, I don't mind what *you* say, Claude. I only hope you may be right, and that Alida will take this man under her care. I don't want to be shut up for days in the house. We have got such a lot we want to do, Claude—haven't we? But, there! I know I shall be victimized, and have to stay at home, and make tisane, and poultices, and broth!" And I sighed impatiently.

But Claude had his own opinion on that point, I saw, and it irritated me; and I sat moodily at the helm, while Claude and Pierre busied themselves with the wounded man, and presently brought up the boat at the little landing-place at the foot of the cliff below the Maison St. Eustache, our home.

CHAPTER II.

A FAMILY HISTORY.

Two figures, wrapped in shawls, stood in the garden on the cliff above us, and two eager voices called to us as we leaped ashore.

"Claude—Lois, where have you been?"

"Yes, indeed, Lois, my dear—so late!"

And we beheld Alida and my aunt Gertrude ready to receive and to scold us.

"Good gracious!" continued the soft, complaining little voice of aunt Gertrude. "What has happened? What—who have the children brought home with them? Ah!—a dead body! Oh, Alida!"

And, with a shriek, aunt Gertrude clung to my sister's arm.

"Nonsense, aunt!" she cried, shaking her off; and, in a moment, was beside us, and helping Claude to support the stranger, who had recovered himself sufficiently to stagger from the boat up the narrow path that led to the garden.

"Lois!" she cried, in her sharp, authoritative voice—"Lois, send Margot for Doctor Warrenne. Aunt Gertrude, is the bed in the spare room made? Call Anna if it is not."

"But, Alida, think, my dear!" whispered aunt Gertrude, in scared tones. "Who is this man? Send him to Doctor Warrenne's my dear! Claude, take him to—"

"Aunt, I'm surprised at you!" cried Alida, indignantly; and she pushed her weeping relative unceremoniously aside. "To think of *you*, who talk to *me* of my want of kindness and my selfishness, and so forth, wishing to turn a dying man into the streets at this hour of the night!"

"N., my dear; not into the streets, but to Doctor Warrenne's; and—"

But here the stranger, overcome by weakness, uttered a groan, and sunk senseless to the earth; and the poor little woman's speech was brought to an untimely close.

"There, aunt—you see!" cried Alida.

And, with a hysterical shriek, aunt Gertrude fell back on a garden seat; and Claude and Pierre, raising the prostrate body in their

arms, followed Alida to the house, and laid it on the bed in our spare room.

Meanwhile, Doctor Warrenne arrived—a grave, tall man—who proceeded to examine his patient; while Claude gave a short account of what had happened, to which he and Alida listened attentively. The doctor's face looked relieved as he ended his examination.

"He is weak from loss of blood; but, unless this exposure to cold and damp brings on more than the usual amount of fever, he'll recover. Well, I am free for the next few hours, and will stay here and watch him. A fine-looking fellow this you've picked up, Lois! Claude, my boy, you're a brave lad. Go home, and get into some dry clothes. Why, you're dripping, and look tired to death. Go to bed at once. Don't frighten your mother with this tale, though—she's highly nervous to-night, and it might upset her."

"All right, sir," said Claude. "Good-night, Lois! Good-night, Alida! The man owes his life to Lois, father, as much or more than he does to me. She saw him first. I should have passed him by if it hadn't been for her."

And he went out, leaving me, Alida, and the doctor alone with the patient.

"What a fine, generous fellow dear Claude is, Doctor Warrenne!" said Alida, casting an ill-pleased glance at me. "Lois, my love, you look tired; and, my dear child, your dress! Go and make yourself tidy; and see what has become of aunt Gertrude. She was quite alarmed, doctor, when the patient fainted, and—there, dear, go and look after papa; he has been alone all the evening, poor dear! Aunt and I had such a host of visitors this afternoon, that we could not manage to sit with him at all, and he'll fancy himself quite deserted. Read to him, my dear, if he wants to go to sleep; and then go to bed yourself. I will attend to the stranger."

And she turned, with a fascinating smile to Doctor Warrenne, who looked on with an amused twinkle in his eye, which I saw, but which Alida failed to notice.

I was glad enough to leave the room, however; and, having ascertained that aunt Gertrude had thought better of her hysterics, and was quite calm and collected now that Alida was not by to flurry her, I repaired to my room, to change my wet clothes and smooth my tangled hair.

As I was concluding these operations I heard three heavy thumps on the floor of the room above me, knew that my father required my presence, and hurriedly ascended the stairs to his apartment. But before I proceed further with my story, I must give some account of ourselves, who we were, and how we came to be living at Honfleur.

My father, then, had once been a rich man, and came of a first-rate family. Yes; my poor paralyzed, strange old father had been in his day a rich, gay young spendthrift; had run through an immense fortune; and, finally, been forced to mortgage every acre of land he yet possessed, and which the law forbade him to sell, to pay his overwhelming debts.

I was but a little child at the time, but I remember well the day when, at Deerhurst Park, our family seat, my father, pale and haggard, walked into my mother's private sitting-room, where I and Alida were doing our lessons, and said to our mother, "We must leave England, Henrietta. I am a ruined man. The Park—all I have left—is let to a stranger, and the sum I shall get for it as rent and your small fortune is all that henceforth we shall have to support us!"

My poor mother! She never uttered one word of reproach or complaint, but the shock killed her. She was a frail, delicate woman, nursed in the lap of luxury from her earliest days; and, two years after we came to France, she died; and, six months after her death, our father had an attack of paralysis, which left him for months after as helpless as a baby, Alida and I being alone with him in the house.

Then aunt Gertrude, our poor mother's step-

sister, came to live with us, to take care of us and the house; not that she ever exercised much authority over either us or it. Alida, though but thirteen at the time, was then, as now, our ruling spirit.

My father grew gradually stronger in health, but the use of one arm and leg was gone forever, and his brain never quite recovered the attack. He was strange and eccentric; and, from being the most extravagant man in creation, became the most parsimonious, not to say miserly.

What did he do with his money?—he did not spend the half. How did he invest it? Where was it put? For long—very long—we tried in vain to discover.

But, after awhile, we did discover. Our father neither invested his money nor let it lie in the bank. All that was not required for household expenditure and the like he hid away in a large oak chest, which he kept under his bed. Since his attack he never left his room, and was, therefore, never separated from his treasure; but in summer he would be wheeled in his invalid-chair onto the flat roof of the drawing-room, onto which his bedroom windows opened, and in his chair placed in such a position that he could see the corner of the oak chest as it protruded from under the bed.

He was a strange, morose man at this time of his life, was my poor father; fidgety, suspicious, and bad-tempered; and, as I have said, very miserly.

"What is the matter, Lois?" he asked, pettishly, in aggrieved accents, as I entered. "Why have you left me so long here alone? Where is Alida—where is your aunt? How cruelly my relations—my children—even treat me! What is all this noise I hear? The servants, even, don't answer my bell. Is every one mad to-night, I wonder?"

"No, father, dear," I said, gayly, lighting his lamp, and rapidly arranging the table, and making things look a little more comfortable about him. "But we have had an adventure."

"An adventure, indeed!" he replied, brightening up. "Who? What? Tell me, child! Nothing gone wrong, I hope? Heaven help us! we are too poor to bear ill-fortune."

"No, no! nothing wrong," I cried; and knowing my poor old father loved nothing so well as a piece of news or gossip, I sat down beside him, and proceeded to relate my story.

He sat in rapt attention; but I saw his eyes seek the treasure-chest as I concluded.

"You are a brave girl, Lois, and Claude is a fine fellow. You must give Pierre a five-franc piece, if we can manage it, child;" and he patted me on the shoulder affectionately. "But we're poor—very poor, Lois. Are you sure this stranger is a respectable fellow, child—eh?"

"Respectable!—he looks like a gentleman," I answered. "But he's too ill to speak and tell us his history as yet."

"Too ill—too weak! Really, Lo? Has Doctor Warrenne seen him, and does he say that? We are alone in the house. A poor old cripple like me, and no protection; and we might be robbed and murdered by an adventurer easily, you know, child."

"Oh, no fear of that, father," I replied, cheerfully; "the poor fellow has had enough of murdering for some time to come."

"Well, well, I daresay you are right," returned my father. "He'll pay Doctor Warrenne himself, I suppose—eh? We couldn't—I couldn't, Lois; I'm too poor—too poor. Dear, dear! to think of me, the owner of an estate like Deerhurst Park, rotting here for want of a few thousands! I remember well the late Duke of G— saying to me—"

"Yes, yes, father, I know," I interrupted, not wishing to arouse my father's reminiscences of the late Duke of G—, whose sayings and doings I knew by heart. "Now I must go down and get you your tea. It's so late!"

"So late! I should think so! Where's Alida?—helping Warrenne? Humph! And your aunt—send her up to me. I want to speak to her. These servants are ruining me

by their extravagance, I find. We must retrench, my child; miserably as we live, we must retrench," he said, complainingly.

"All right, papa, dear!" I replied.

I was accustomed to the cry of retrenchment, and knowing it meant nothing gave him a kiss, and ran down-stairs again to aunt Gertrude.

As I passed the sick-room, I looked in.

Dr. Warrenne was standing by the table at the other end making up some medicine, while Alida was seated by the bed, listening attentively to the mutterings of the sick man.

I entered softly, and stood in silence beside them; and the stranger looked at me, and again the terrified expression I had before noticed came over his face, and he began to talk wildly.

"Lois, you agitate him. Do go away," said Alida, in a sharp voice.

At the sound of her voice, he turned, and she bent over him to arrange the bandage on his head.

"Is he doing well, Dr. Warrenne?" I asked.

"Oh, well enough. He'll be delirious for a night or two, of course; but he seems a robust fellow, and I don't expect any danger. I wonder who he can be, and where he comes from? He's got some ugly scars about him, and has seen fighting somewhere or other," said the doctor. "There, Miss Clinton, that will do. The bandage is sufficiently moist now."

I turned to leave the room, and as I passed through the door, the same feeling of repugnance I had experienced when the stranger first opened his eyes in the boat returned to me as I noticed now their cunning expression; and again I shuddered.

But Alida saw it not. She was gazing at him with a look of intense, unmistakable admiration.

What was there in the expression of those two faces that made me half sick and faint with a vague, nameless terror of I knew not what?

Who can tell? But as I quitted the room, I half wished that Claude and I had left the man to his fate on the cold sand-bank; or, rather, that we had passed it by without becoming aware of his presence and danger.

Whom had I, all unwittingly, brought into our home? What evil threatened us?

CHAPTER III.

SHE HAD MONEY, AND I HAD NONE.

The autumn passed slowly away, and ere winter set in, our guest had recovered his health and strength, and his presence in the house had grown familiar to us—in fact he had become quite a family friend. He had given us a full, free, and satisfactory account of himself, and set every heart at rest on the score of his respectability. He was a charming guest, polite, cheerful, accomplished, and amusing, and all the household liked him, except Claude and myself; and I never could get over a deeply-rooted suspicion that he was not all that he appeared, but found no one to sympathize with me except Claude.

Aunt Gertrude (who at first doubted the safety and propriety of receiving him under our roof) was now his warm admirer. His polite, respectful manner, and delicate attention to her little wants and whims, had won her heart, and charmed her. Why should I doubt that he was the person he gave himself out to be—Gaston, Count de Rouville! Had he not shown himself a perfect gentleman in all his dealings? My father, too, was never so happy as when the Count was beside him, chatting gayly, rolling him cigarettes of the choicest tobacco with the deftest fingers, and telling him highly-seasoned anecdotes of the Imperial Court, or stirring adventures in his own life. And as for Alida, I never even dared to hint before her that I did not consider the Count perfection. Alida adored him—there was no other word for it; she was at his beck and call, watched for his coming and going; when he spoke, hung on his lips, and his slightest wish was law to her. I saw at once how it was with her; my haughty

sister loved the man with all the strength of her willful, headstrong disposition. But did he care for her? I doubted it.

The account he had given of his adventure on that night was a simple one enough. He had left Pont-la-Riviere in a boat that afternoon, and had been attacked and robbed by the boatman, who had abandoned him on the sand-bank where we had found him. Of the boatful of ruffians who had passed us, he knew, he said, nothing. He had been traveling for some time, and came the whole way from Paris by river, when the adventure happened that had so nearly cost him his life, and brought him beneath our roof.

My father related to him all our early history, only suppressing, I noticed, the name of our family seat, and told him of the trouble that had caused us to leave England and settle at Honfleur.

He told him, too, many a tale of his doings and adventures in early life, which were new to us, and would dilate to him with tears on the loss of his fortune and the death of our mother; all of which, from a man so guarded and suspicious as our poor father had become since his illness, astounded me, and I wondered how the man had in a few weeks obtained such an ascendancy over him.

Of course we (that is, all the family except me) believed his words without question; and as he seemed a man of wealth as well as good birth, my father took to him immensely; and, to my surprise, I often found him relating to our guest many secrets that I should not have believed any consideration on earth would have induced him to confide to an outsider, still less to an utter stranger.

Sometimes I sat reading by the fire while those two conversed, and soon discovered how cleverly the Count drew my father out, and wormed his secrets from him; and the more I listened to our guest's talk, and observed his wheedling ways, the more I disliked him. He, on the contrary, seemed to affect my society, and to endeavor in every way to make himself agreeable to me, and often roused Alida's bitter but carefully-concealed wrath by the way he openly preferred my society, and consulted my pleasure, before hers. This caused many a storm to burst on my devoted head, and at length I plainly told my sister that her Count was odious to me, and that I believed him to be an impostor.

Alida turned, perfectly speechless with anger, and her blue eyes flashed daggers at me.

"And pray on what do you found your most valuable opinion, Lois?—though why I should trouble myself to notice the foolish ideas of a child like you—a jealous child, too, as I verily believe—I don't know," she said, after a pause, in a cold, stern voice.

"I may be a child, Alida, as you say," I replied, hotly, "but I am not blind! I can see how that man fawns, flatters, and works himself into every one's confidence. I hate his soft, purring, catlike ways!"

"Which means to say," answered Alida, contemptuously, "that the Count is polite, refined, and courteous, and that you, therefore, find his ways a little tiresome. I dare say, after the free and easy manners of Claude and the boys you are accustomed to associate with, Count de Rouville's manners seem a little ceremonious to you; but—"

"Ceremonious!" I cried, in scorn. "No; but fawning, Alida—fawning and cringing, I tell you! As for Claude, I defy you to find a flaw in his manners! Even papa, who is so hard to please, says they are perfect. As to the Count, if he is a count at all—"

"If he is a count! Ha, ha!" and Alida laughed heartily. "Really, Lois, you mustn't be offended with me for laughing. Poor little thing! you are too absurd. What should make you imagine he is not a count?"

"Claude and I—" I began.

"Listen to her!" laughed Alida again. "She and Claude sitting in judgment on their elders! Well, my dear Lois, I am surprised at you. You must think us all fools—papa and aunt

Gertrude, as well as me. Papa has seen enough of the world, Lois, I fancy, to be able to decide if the Count be a gentleman or not."

"Yes; and I am astonished he does not judge him more rightly," I began.

"That is, that his judgment does not agree with yours?" and she looked at me again with a sort of patronizing pity. "Now, be a good girl, Lois, and give up these ridiculous ideas, and tell Claude not to make a fool of himself, by encouraging you in them."

"Claude never makes a fool of himself, Alida," I replied. "Some day you'll know your Count for a worthless scamp."

This opinion, delivered as it was in a burst of passion, I was shortly afterward convinced was correct. At any rate, I decided in my own mind that if he were not an impostor, he was full of duplicity.

Sitting in my father's room one evening, reading the newspaper, the following remarks from him fell on my ears, and my own name spoken:—

"Yes, Count; Alida will be well off some day, thank Heaven! She will be rich, as well as beautiful; but my poor little Lois there, without a tithe of her sister's good looks, will be penniless to boot! Sad, sir, sad for a man in my position not to be able to provide for his child! Poor little Lois!"

I felt the hot blood mounting to my cheeks. My father continued, "I had a sister, sir. A strange, unnatural sort of relation she was—spent thousands on what she called 'charity,' and left her only brother to starve, by Jove! She died, and left me not a shilling; but to Alida she bequeathed ten thousand pounds, and so tied up, sir—would you believe it?—that I cannot touch even the interest of it, which is to accumulate till the girl is of age; and then she is to have the management of the whole sum herself."

I saw a look of interest come into the Count's face, and his eyes glittered strangely; but my poor old father, absorbed in his narrative, observed nothing, and continued,—"Deerhurst Park" (I saw the Count start) "is mortgaged heavily; but"—and the poor old man shook his gray head knowingly—"I don't live up to my income, Count. I will pay off the mortgages yet before I die, and then 'the king shall enjoy his own again.' Ha! ha!"

The Count smiled, and in voices so low and confidential that I could scarcely catch even a stray word, they continued their talk. It was about his plans and intentions respecting Deerhurst, I felt sure, and about his money affairs. How had the Count contrived to make my father, a man usually so reticent on his private matters, confide in him so fully and unreservedly! I felt indignant, and presently laid down my newspaper, and left the room.

After this I perceived a gradual change come over the Count's manner toward me. I was no longer number one in his estimation. My pleasure and convenience were not consulted. Alida's star was in the ascendant, and mine had, to all appearance, suddenly set forever. Alida was in the seventh heaven of delight, and triumphed over me openly and unmercifully. I bore my fate with meekness and patience, caring little for Alida's sneers, and delighted to be left alone by the Count, and permitted to follow my own devices undisturbed; but this change in the state of affairs did not escape notice.

"My dear," said aunt Gertrude, anxiously, to me one day, "you do not feel low, I hope?"

"I, aunt?" I cried, in astonishment. "Why?"

"Why, my child? Well, I don't know. Lois. I'm a stupid old woman, and never had a lover in my life; but I did think, dear, it was *you* the Count was in love with. But now he seems to have no eyes for any one but Alida."

I burst out laughing.

"Aunt, you know I cannot endure the Count, but I have noticed the change, and tell you it is Alida's money, not Alida, he loves." And I related to her the conversation I had overheard in my father's room.

Aunt Gertude looked grave.

"I remember my dear father," she said, "telling us to beware of foreigners, that they were often only fortune-hunters; but the Count seems to be so well off himself!"

"Seems to be, aunt!—but what do we really know of him?" I said, gloomily. "Well, I only hope it won't be the worse for Alida! She will be one-and-twenty in a few months now, and I believe she's over head and ears in love with the Count. Ugh! how you, and she, and papa can like him I can't imagine!"

"You are prejudiced, and hard to please, Lois," replied my aunt, with a sigh. "Now I must take this up to your father;" and she trudged off with a bowl of hot soup, leaving me to my meditations.

That night, as we sat round the tea-table, I observed a look of unwonted elation on Alida's face. De Rouville, too, seemed unusually joyous, and I felt sure that Alida's fate was decided; that she and the stranger we had saved from destruction had agreed to throw in their lot together. Why had I not spoken earlier? I would yet make an attempt to save her. I would speak that night. I might be wrong—it might not even yet be too late.

So that evening, when we had retired to bed, I braced up my nerves, and, attired in my dressing-gown, knocked with a trembling hand at the door of my sister's room, and entered. She was seated before the glass, engaged in combing out the long, thick tresses of fair hair that reached far below her waist, and her face wore a look of greater content than I had ever seen there before. Was I destined to be the first to disturb this newly-found peace? I sighed, and trembled.

"Alida," I began, abruptly, "I want to speak to you!"

"Well," she answered, calmly, rolling a long lock of her shining hair round and round her slender fingers; "what is it, Lo? Be quick, for I have news for you."

I felt desperate.

"Alida," I must tell you. The Count, I believe—I am sure—"

And I began faltering and hesitating terribly.

"You believe—you are sure that he cares for me—isn't that it, child?" she said, smiling.

"Cares for you!" I cried. "No; it's for your money he cares, Alida."

She looked bewildered.

"My money!" she said in a low voice—"he care for my money?"

"Yes," I cried; "papa talked to him about it—told him of it one night six weeks ago. Before that it was me he persecuted with his attentions, and, after, he turned round and left me, and pretended to care only for you."

I suppose my words were badly chosen, or that Alida could not or would not understand me.

"Poor child!" she said, in a pitying voice; "did you mistake his gratitude for love, Lois, and did you set your poor little heart on him? Why did you not confide in me, child, and I could have told you long ago that it was not you he loved?"

"I set my heart on him, the mean impostor!" I cried, getting into a rage.

"Hush! hush!" said Alida, with a dignified and superior air. "Poor child! you are jealous; you don't know what you are saying."

"Jealous?" I cried, burning with rage. "Alida, you must be mad? It is you who have deceived and are deceiving yourself—ruining yourself! I tell you that man does not love you—that he cares only for your money; and when I see you throwing yourself away on a wretch like that, a low adventurer for all we know, it makes me—"

"Hush, Lois! Silence!" cried Alida, her face white with passion, but rising quietly from her chair. "Do not insult me and him further, for I am engaged to Count de Rouville, and have promised that in six months I will become his wife."

I sunk back on a chair, with a groan.

"Oh, Alida, Alida," I cried, "think, think,

I beseech you, what you are doing! Oh, would to Heaven Claude and I had left him to his fate in the river!"

"Shame, Lois!" cried Alida, indignantly. "What have you against Gaston that you should abuse him in such unmeasured terms? What has he done? Wherein has he offended you? Unless you are jealous of his preference for me, I cannot understand your way of talking."

"Jealous!" I cried again. "Oh, Alida, you little know me. I—I—"

And I stopped short, feeling that in truth I had no accusation to bring against the Count; that it was only from my own impression of his character that I spoke; that I had really no definite complaint to make against him.

"Now, Lois, do be reasonable," continued Alida, after a pause. "If you are not jealous, it seems to me you have taken up a most unkind and absurd prejudice against Gaston. Drop it, my dear; for in a few months he will be your brother-in-law. And now good-night."

And, without further words, she opened the door, and pushed me gently from the room.

CHAPTER IV.

AWAY TO THE WARS.

"CLAUDE, look here," I said, in a low voice to my old playmate, as we stood in the Market Place of Honfleur, just at the foot of the bell-tower—I with a large market-basket on my arm, and Claude with another in his hand. "See what they say here in the *Normandy Journal*."

And I thrust the newly-opened paper that I had just bought at a neighboring stall into his hands, and together we read the following paragraph:

"CAPTURE OF A NOTORIOUS ROBBER AND TWO OF HIS GANG.—A few days ago the police laid hands on the chief, or one of the chief, miscreants concerned in the late robberies at Bishop's Bridge, Jean Deprat, and he is awaiting the sentence of the tribunal for his many crimes, together with two of his companions. He is an old and well-known offender, who, by his superior cunning and extraordinary good fortune, has for several months succeeded in eluding the vigilance of the authorities. The head of the gang still remains at large, though, from a few words let drop by one of the men, it is considered possible that he may have been murdered by his companions shortly after the last robbery at the Chateau Lory, as it seems the gang had an idea that he was playing them false, and intended to betray them to the authorities. We give this information, however, for what it may be worth. The man may merely be trying to screen his chief, and throw the police off the scent. Deprat's sentence is likely to be the galleys for twenty years."

"What do you say to that, Claude?" asked I, in a frightened voice.

"When did these robberies take place?" he answered; but there were no dates mentioned in the paper.

We both looked serious, yet hardly liked to speak our thoughts aloud.

There was nothing to connect Gaston de Rouville with the band of villains mentioned in the *Normandy Journal*; and yet I for one felt certain he was in some way or another mixed up with them.

"What do you think of it, Claude? Why are you silent! Do speak!" I said, at last.

"Speak, Lois! What am I to say? I hardly like to give utterance to the suspicion that I know is at this moment in both our minds. If it should be untrue, undeserved, we should be doing him a terrible injustice, Lo. I will speak to my father about it, if you like, but I believe he thinks well of De Rouville, and in no way shares our distrust of him."

"But, Claude, it is awful! If we should be right, only think of Alida!—only think that perhaps we are harboring a desperate villain in our house!—and what is far worse, that he will shortly become one of the family—my sister's husband! Oh, dear! what can we do to prevent it?" I cried.

"Nothing, Lois," he answered firmly, "unless we can discover something certain about him. We are powerless now; and, what is more, I fear every one would think us very wrong for entertaining the suspicions we do, and would tell us so if we mentioned them.

We know nothing against De Rouville; only, if I had been your father, Lois, I would have tried to find out more about him than we know at present."

"It is dreadful!" I said, greatly moved. "But, as you say, Claude, we can do nothing. No one would listen to us for a moment. But speak to the Doctor—do!"

So Claude spoke to his father, and of course Doctor Warrenne looked upon our ideas as the result of blind prejudice, and gently but gravely rebuked us for our irrational suspicions; and of course we were compelled to be silent, and bury our doubts in our own bosoms; in spite of what he said, I for one suspected still.

And now a great sorrow fell upon me. I and my favorite friend and companion, Claude, were to be separated.

He obtained a commission in the German army, and had to leave Honfleur for Berlin at a week's notice.

Claude and I had often looked forward to, and talked sorrowfully of, this day.

He had been educated in Germany, and, since quite a boy, his ambition had been to enter the military service of that country.

But, for all that, now that the day had really come, the parting was a hard trial to us both.

"What shall I do without you, Claude?" I said, ruefully. "I shall have no one to talk to about all our troubles. I shall be most dreadfully lonely, Claude! But you will write, won't you? I don't know what we shall do if we are months without hearing from you!"

And my voice broke.

"Do you really care so much, Lois?" he asked, eagerly.

"Care! Of course I do, Claude!"

And then I looked up in his face, and something in his eyes made me blush; and I felt his arm steal round me, and, for the first time since we were little children, he kissed me.

"You will not forget me—you will not change, Lois?" he whispered. "You will always think of me, and care for me, and love me?"

"Always, Claude!" I replied, in a low voice.

"We shall be very poor; you won't mind that, Lois?" he said, after a pause.

I started.

"Very poor! When? We are very poor now, Claude!" I replied.

"Yes; but—but when you are my wife, you know, Lois! I sha'n't get much pay. We shall be very poor at first. Will you mind?" he asked.

"Mind?—no!" I replied, blushing. "I don't mind with you, Claude! Why, I can cook, and do all sorts of work! But are you sure you care enough for me, Claude?—for poor, ugly, stupid little me?"

"Ugly!" he said, tenderly. "Why, Lois, I think you beautiful! You are not like Alida, I know; but, oh! how much truer and sweeter your face is, dear! I am so glad we have settled this, Lo—that you are to be my wife, I mean—before my starting! It will make me so happy to know that you will be waiting for me; and that when I get my step, and we are well enough off, you will be ready to marry me!"

"But what will Doctor Warrenne say, Claude?" I asked, almost fearfully.

"My father? Why, dear, he loves you now. He says— Well, perhaps I'd better not tell you all he says about you, Lois; but I am sure I could not have chosen him a daughter he would have liked better. We had better keep our own counsel, though, Lois, till I return. What do you say?"

"Yes; certainly, Claude. Don't let us say anything. I should always have Alida laughing at me, and calling it a boy and girl attachment, and saying it was sure to come to nothing; but, oh, Claude, that shall not be! We can be true and patient, though we are so young."

"Yes, dearest," he answered, kissing me again; "nothing shall separate us! Ah! how I shall think of you when I am away in Germany, and look forward to the day when I

shall be here again. By the way, there are war rumors afloat, do you know, Lois?"

"War rumors!—how?" I asked, breathlessly.

"Yes; they talk of a war between France and Germany," he said.

"Oh, Claude, how awful!" I cried, clinging to him. "Just fancy if you were killed!"

"Well, we won't meet trouble half-way, dear," he answered, lightly. "War is not declared yet, and may not be at all; and if it is, why, I may not be sent on active service; but if I am, Lois, you must be a brave girl, and keep up your spirits. Fighting is my trade now, you know."

"A terrible trade!" I murmured.

"Well, we have often talked about the army, and decided that it was the most generous profession in the world—eh, Lo?" he answered, slyly.

"Yes; so it is, of course," I replied; "but—oh, I hope war won't break out, Claude!" And I looked up into his face with frightened eyes.

"Dear little one," he said, putting his arm round me; "ah! it will make troubles and dangers so much lighter having you to love me and pray for me, Lois. We must be always thinking of meeting again, dear, and that will make the time pass quickly."

"How long will it be, Claude?" I asked.

"I hardly know, dear, but many months, I fear," he replied; "but months will soon pass, darling."

And so, for a happy hour or two, we talked, wandering along the bank of the great river; and, a few days after, Claude departed, and I was left alone.

We never breathed a word of our love to any one. How Alida would have laughed, and how shocked papa would have been, and how it would have dismayed the Warrennes to learn that their Claude—their only son—had engaged himself to a penniless damsel like me at the very outset of his career! And so I had to hide my grief in my own bosom, having no one to whom I could confide my woes with safety.

For a few days I went about looking very dolorous; and then I got a long letter from Claude, from Paris, and then another, written at Berlin which cheered me up a bit; and I gradually regained a certain amount of my usual spirits, and went about my daily avocations resigned to my fate, if not cheerful over it.

But, oh, how I missed Claude at every turn, and thought of the time that must elapse before his first leave would be due with a heavy heart! It seemed so long, so very long, ere I should see him again. Ah! what a mercy it was that I could not look into the future, and know how many a weary month would have to roll by ere my bonnie Claude would once more be with me!

But time passed on, though slowly enough to me, and brought great events to pass. The war between France and Germany broke out, and one of the first regiments ordered on service was the one to which Claude had been appointed. He wrote in high spirits at the idea of seeing service, and yet, I think, regretting to draw his sword against the land where so many happy years of his life had been passed; but it was his duty now, and soon his regiment was in the thick of the campaign, and for months we heard nothing of him.

And the days that brought such great changes in public affairs brought also great changes in the prospects of poor insignificant me. My godmother, an early friend of my mother's, and a rich and eccentric old maid, of whom we had quite lost sight, died, and left me twenty thousand pounds.

It was a surprise to us all—to no one more than to myself—for I had no reason to think that my godmother even remembered my existence; but she had done so, and, with loving allusion to her old friend my mother, left me this sum in remembrance of their early friendship.

My father was delighted, and kissed me a thousand times, and congratulated me (and

himself) on my good fortune; for the money had been left to me unconditionally, and I could spend capital and interest just as I, and he wished.

"Ah, Gaston, my boy!" he said to the Count, as he sat beside him that night; "my little Lois is a beggar no longer! Thank Heaven, I can die happy now! I shall leave both my girls provided for. The old man may close his eyes in peace, and say 'good-by' to the world which has treated him so cruelly with a quiet heart! He will not have to endure the bitter thought that his child is left to its mercy!"

"But, my dear sir," said De Rouville, with the insinuating smile I so detested, "since it was settled that I should become a member of your family, surely such a thought has never troubled you? Miss Lois, my preserver, my guardian angel—so soon to be my sister—do you think I would allow her to be homeless? No, sir; not while I have a home to offer her, or a franc to share with her!"

And he would have taken my hand, and pressed it to his lips, but I drew it away coldly.

"Ah, Gaston, you are a generous fellow, I know!" replied my father, with tears in his eyes; "and it is, indeed, a comfort to me to think that I shall leave my girls such a protector—such a husband and brother-in-law! I am an old man now, sir, and any minute may be called to leave them!"

"Don't talk of leaving us, papa!" I interrupted. "You are not old, and are stronger than you have been for years! Don't talk of dying; and, for the rest, I am well able to take care of myself."

And I turned haughtily away, not without catching a peculiar expression on De Rouville's dark face.

What did that look mean? I tried hard, but failed to divine. I understood it well, however, a few weeks afterward.

CHAPTER V.

THE SERPENT.

As the time fixed for the wedding drew nearer, a change came over Gaston de Rouville's behavior toward his betrothed. Instead of becoming fonder, his manner grew more distant. He seemed often dull and distraught, and kept away from Alida strangely; and at times I caught his dark eyes fixed on me with an expression that, without knowing exactly why, made my blood boil.

At first, Alida did not appear to notice this change; but at length it grew so marked that she could not help but observe it, and I saw how deeply she was wounded. Poor girl! I pitied her. I saw how she tried all her arts and fascinations on Gaston—made every effort to please him, and all in vain.

Instead of being forever beside her, accompanying her in all her walks, reading to her, singing with her, and attending to her most trifling wants and wishes as of yore, De Rouville kept himself apart from her, sat silent and alone, and, as much as possible, avoided her society. What could have caused this sudden change in his demeanor?

It was spring again, and the lovely woods and lanes around Honfleur were filled with flowers, and the fruit-trees in its numberless orchards were white with blossoms. Spring, that most beautiful of seasons in beautiful old Normandy!

I was walking one soft, bright morning up and down under the white boughs of our own apple-trees, thinking of Claude, and my heart filled with anxious forebodings as to his fate (for it was many weeks since we had heard from him, and his regiment had been in several severe engagements), and wondering if he were still living, or lying on some terrible battlefield, when the sound of stealthy footsteps startled me from my gloomy reverie, and, quickly brushing away the tears from my eyes, I turned and beheld De Rouville.

"Why, I thought you had gone to St. Sau-

veur with Alida?" I said, in a discontented voice.

"No," he replied in a merry tone; "Alida drove your aunt there in the pony carriage; there was no room for me. I promised to meet them on their way back, but I don't think I shall."

And he pulled his black mustache thoughtfully.

"Alida will be disappointed if you don't keep your word, M. de Rouville," I said, turning to go back to the house.

"Do you think so?" he answered. "Where are you going? Can't you stay for a few moments more? Have I frightened you away, Lois? What an unfortunate man I am!"

"Frightened me? Certainly not!" I replied, stopping short, although my heart beat painfully fast, and I felt inclined to fly to the house. "But what do you want with me?"

"What do I want? Why, mayn't I enjoy your society for a few moments alone, like any one else?" he asked in a bitter tone.

"My society!" I answered. "What do you mean? Don't you have the benefit of my society nearly all day long?"

"Yes," he replied, in a low voice; "but not as I wish to see you—alone!" (I was breathless with astonishment). He continued, "Lois, I have a confession to make; but promise—swear that you will never repeat what I have to tell you, unless—"

And he paused, and fixed his eyes on mine. I shuddered, as of yore, under his gaze. What had he to confess? For Alida's sake, I must listen.

"I promise," I said. "What have you to tell me?"

He hesitated, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Lois," said he, "I have made a great mistake—a fearful error—and I come to you to help me to retrieve it. I ought never to have asked Alida to be my wife—I cannot marry her!"

"You cannot marry her?" I cried, half-joyfully; and I felt the hot blood rushing to my cheeks. "You cannot marry her? What do you mean, Count de Rouville? Why cannot you marry her?"

He paused again.

"I should be doing her a wrong!" he said, presently, in a low voice. "I cannot marry her, because I love another!"

"Another?" I repeated, in a low tone. "You love another?"

He nodded, and looked at me strangely.

"Can you not guess whom?" he asked, in a soft, low voice.

I felt perfectly bewildered; and then a sudden horrifying idea shot through my breast, and I started from beside him.

"What do you mean?" I cried, my eyes flashing. "Whom do you love?"

"Hush!—hush, Lois!" he said. "Yes, I see you have discovered my secret; that you know the mistake I have made; that you feel it is *you* I love."

I stood stock still, struck dumb with terror. He, mistaking my feelings, I suppose, continued passionately, "Yes, Lois, it is you I love—you, my preserver, my guardian angel! Ah! what a fool—what an idiot I have been! I was led away by your sister's beauty, Lois; but it was you whom I really loved; you are my second self, my equal! You have a heart to love, a mind to appreciate me; while Alida, poor girl—"

"Stop, sir!" I cried, in a voice so cold and stern, that I think, hardened as he was, it startled him. "Hush! remember you are speaking of my sister, a woman far too good for you, for a villain like you! Oh! to think that she should have thrown away her heart on such a wretch!"

And tears of indignation started to my eyes. "Ah! you think only of Alida," he replied, gloomily. "Think of me, Lois! I love you, and with you life would be so sweet; with Alida it could never be aught but commonplace. We should be miserable together; she has not the mind to comprehend me, the soul

to mate with mine; but you are different. Be mine, Lois, marry me, and I swear to make you the happiest of women. There is nothing I would not do, no sacrifice I would not make for you!"

"I marry you? Never! I hate and despise you, Count de Rouville; curse the day I brought you to this house, to deceive my sister, and destroy her happiness!"

"You are angry with me, Lois?" he interrupted, calmly, almost disdainfully. "Take time to think about it."

"To think about it?" I replied. "Believe me, I would rather break stones on the road, would beg, starve, or marry Pierre the boatman, rather than become your wife! Who are you, I should like to know? What do we know for certain about you?"

I saw his face change.

"You may regret your words some day, Lois," he said. "Remember, if not your husband, I shall certainly be your brother-in-law."

"What!" I cried. "You?—you? Never! I will tell Alida of this at once—I will!"

"Tell Alida, by all means!" he cried, with a mocking laugh. "Do you think she would believe you, child? Not she! Alida has too great faith in her own attractions to be jealous of you, Lois, and would never hear a word against me. She believes you are jealous of her, and that she supplanted you with me very cleverly." And he laughed a sneering laugh. "Tell her if you like, my little angel, but it will be lost labor; she will not have the wit to perceive that you are speaking the truth."

And bowing, he turned and left the orchard, whistling a gay French chansonette as he went, and leaving me overwhelmed with disgust and indignation.

An hour afterward he returned with Alida on his arm, whose face was so radiant and beaming, that I saw all the little difference there had been between them for the last few weeks had been explained away, forgiven, and forgotten.

De Rouville was affection and attention itself to her, and behaved to me with the perfection of brotherly courtesy. Nothing—not a turn of the features, not a look, not a gesture gave me to understand that he remembered the scene that had taken place between us in the orchard; and when I looked at him, and observed his devotion to Alida, and heard his affectionate speeches, and saw his loving looks, and the perfect delight he appeared to take in her society, I could hardly believe that what had happened was real—that it was not all a dream. Should I tell Alida? I felt I could not—that it would be worse than useless. Alida loved him; Alida believed in herself and her powers of attraction, and looked down on and despised me.

No; De Rouville was right. If I spoke, she would think the tale but an outpouring of jealous spite—a fabrication of my own, to wound her and revenge myself on her lover, whom she persisted in believing I adored in secret. No; it would be of no avail, and I resolved to bury the dark secret in my breast forever.

I slept, however, but little that night. I had passed a part of the evening as usual with my father in his own apartment. De Rouville had been there, too, and I had overheard enough of their conversation to enable me to understand that, with the help of my newly-acquired fortune, my father hoped, in a few months, to pay off the mortgages on Deerhurst Park, and then to return to our own domains. Dear old father! I felt how readily I would give up any, or all, of my fortune to make him happy; and when De Rouville left, he and I had a long talk together on the matter, and it was all settled before I retired to rest.

As soon as Alida's marriage had taken place, we were to return to England and Deerhurst Park once more.

"I have saved a few thousand, Lois," said my father. "Your poor mother's fortune, too, is all there;" and he pointed to the chest. "It's

a strange way of keeping money, isn't it? But, somehow, I cannot trust those banks. It's all in the box, and I have the key in my waistcoat pocket here. I'll put enough of yours with it, my dear, to make up the required sum—eighteen thousand pounds. Lois—hush! Who's there?" And he stopped and listened, and I did the same.

Did my ear deceive me, or did I hear a footstep steal cautiously and swiftly down the stairs?

I rose quickly, and ran down; but no one was there, and in the distance I heard De Rouville's voice in laughing conversation with Alida and aunt Gertrude.

It must have been our fancy, so I returned to my father, who was sitting, greatly disturbed, by the window, and did my best to soothe him.

For a long time we talked together, and my father told me of his former life; spoke to me of my mother, and their early married days; and then talked of the future with such hope and confidence, that it gladdened my heart to hear him.

"You will not leave me yet awhile, Lois, will you?" said he. "Alida will go from me soon now, and I shall miss her—yes, I shall miss Alida sadly. But you would be a terrible loss to me, Lois. You will stay with me a little longer, won't you, dear?" And the old man's voice had a plaintive ring in it.

"Yes, yes, dear father!" I replied; "I will not leave you yet!"

And I kissed him, and he patted my cheek fondly, as he used to do when I was a tiny child.

"I trust Alida will be happy," he continued, in a dreamy voice. "I like Gaston, and he is devoted to her; and I wish you liked him better, dear!"

My father, then, had noticed my aversion to my future brother-in-law.

I shivered, and did not reply; and then aunt Gertrude came in, and our talk was over.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE WEDDING-DAY.

It was the morning of Alida's wedding-day—a bright morning in June. The birds chattered in the trees around St. Eustache House, and the air was filled with the scent of roses and violets as I opened my eyes, and, with a heavy weight at my heart, knew that the day on which we were to lose her had really come.

I rose, and dressed quickly, though it was but seven o'clock; for I had a few finishing touches to put to the wedding breakfast, a few fresh flowers to arrange in the drawing-room, and the wedding favors to put into the little baskets I and Renee de Clairvaux, the other bridesmaid, were to carry.

I felt my heart fill with a deep pity as I passed Alida's door, and stopped for a moment to ascertain if she were yet awake; but all was profoundly silent. She was buried in quiet sleep; and, although Alida and I had never been very great friends—although she had always treated me rather hardly, and as if I were of no particular importance in the world, I felt as if the house would be very desolate without her, and was anxious and alarmed as to her future.

I suppose the state of my mind was betrayed by my face, for, after I had been busily employed for half an hour or so laying a bunch of newly-gathered violets beside the plate of each expected guest, aunt Gertrude, in a morning wrapper, and her hair twisted up in a curious and hasty fashion, entered, her face beaming with satisfaction. As she looked at me, however, it fell.

"Dear me, Lois! what is the matter?" she cried. "How wretched you look, child! What has happened?"

"Nothing, aunt," I replied, in some surprise.

"Oh, I see—I understand! You are unhappy at the idea of Alida leaving us. True, true; it will be dull for you, dear, when she and Gaston have gone. Dear, dear! how I shall miss him!

What a happy girl she is to have got such a husband!" she continued.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You know, aunt, I am not so enthusiastic about the Count as you are," I replied.

Aunt Gertrude looked at me curiously.

"Why, child, do you still hold to your silly ideas about him?" she asked.

"I have seen no reason to change; but don't let's talk of that now," I answered. "Put those white roses into the vases, aunty, and then we must go and arouse the bride;" and hastily I finished my table decorations, and followed by Anne, with breakfast on a tray, went up to Alida's room.

She was awake, and up already and sitting by the toilet table, so fresh, and fair, and lovely, that the tears came into my eyes as I looked at her.

On the sofa lay her bridal dress of shining white satin, and a veil of costly lace beside it; and scarcely had I entered, when aunt Gertrude hurried in, carrying a splendid bouquet, a jewel case, and a note—all from the bridegroom.

Alida's face flushed with pleasure as she read this note.

"Dear Gaston, how good he is to me!" she murmured; and then she opened the case, and started with surprise at the beauty of the ornaments it contained. A cross, composed of six large opals, set round with diamonds, lay sparkling and glowing within it, attached to a golden chain of the most delicate workmanship.

"Wear this, my dearest Alida," said the note, "and keep it ever in remembrance of this happy day."

It was a splendid gift, and became Alida well; and when dressed in her soft, white robe, with orange blossoms in her golden hair, and her graceful form enveloped in the folds of the delicate lace veil, the diamonds flashing on her bosom, I thought I had never beheld so fair a woman.

Mademoiselle de Clairvaux and I wore white dresses, trimmed with wild roses.

I had always considered Renee a very pretty girl; but Alida to-day threw her completely into the shade, and I began to wonder what I must look like beside her.

At eleven o'clock we were at the little British chapel, where the marriage ceremony was to be performed.

Gaston professed himself a Protestant, so no second ceremony was needed.

He was there before us with his best man, and most of the numerous friends we had invited had already arrived.

Gaston, I thought, looked strangely pale and agitated; and as I followed Alida and Dr. Warren—who, as my father was unable to come to the church, was to give her away—up the aisle, I saw him cast more than one uneasy glance toward the door. And then we took our places around the altar, and the ceremony began; and in a few minutes, for weal or woe, Alida and Gaston de Rouville were made man and wife, "till death should them part."

Amid kisses and congratulations, the bride was led by her husband into the vestry, and the register was signed.

As De Rouville appended his signature to the entry, I noticed how his hand shook, and what an effort it appeared to him to control his agitation.

I signed next to the newly-married pair; and as I looked at their signatures, and read that of Gaston Colbert de Rouville and Alida Clinton—her maiden name signed by the bride for the last time—a strange foreboding of coming ill filled my soul.

"Too late—too late! She is his wife now. What will come of it?" whispered a voice at my heart. And then Alida was led by Gaston to the narrow entrance of the little church.

The carriage drove up. She entered it; and together they drove off to St. Eustache House.

We had to wait for a few moments in the chapel for the other carriages to arrive.

The service was over quicker than the coach-

men apparently had anticipated; for none were at their posts, save the driver of the bride's carriage.

At last, however, they appeared, and in a few minutes we were rattling up the steep, stony street, and then bowling smoothly over the broad road that led to our abode.

Judge of my astonishment on entering the dining-room to find my father seated in his easy-chair at the head of the table, Alida standing beside him, receiving his congratulations.

"Ah, Lois! you see there is nothing such a clever fellow as Gaston cannot manage," he cried. "Only to think how many years have passed since I last left my room! It is all locked up, my dear;" this in a whisper to me. "Gaston and his servant carried me down, Lo."

"Dear father," I replied, "I am delighted to see you; and if it does not harm you—"

"Harm me!—why should it, child? No, no; I feel the better for it. Ah, Gertrude! (as aunt Gertrude entered, and gave a little shriek of surprise at seeing my father) "this is an unexpected event, isn't it? All Gaston's doing. Where is he, by the way—eh?"

"Giving some orders, papa, about the carriage," replied Alida. "He has a portmanteau, I know, to pack, and— Ah! here he is!" and the Count entered, looking flushed, and yet highly relieved and contented.

Quite a change had come over him since his return from church.

His then troubled visage was now joyful, and all traces of perturbation had vanished from his countenance.

Then followed the wedding breakfast, which was like most other wedding breakfasts, I suppose. Healths were drunk, speeches made. Aunt Gertrude burst into a fit of weeping at the touching manner in which the bridegroom spoke of our family, and especially of herself.

My father made an appropriate reply.

The bridesmaids' health was proposed, and Dr. Warrenne returned thanks.

And then the bride rose, and retired to change her dress, and don her traveling attire.

I followed to assist her; and as she put on her pretty traveling hat, she stooped and kissed me with more feeling than she had ever before shown for me.

"Dear Lo, everything has gone off beautifully! Gaston is delighted! How well you have managed it! How we shall miss you! You must come and stay with us soon, dear. Now I must say, good-by to papa. He won't miss me much, but he will miss Gaston; and so will all of you, I think. Come, dear!" And giving one look round the little chamber—hers no longer—she went out, and shut the door behind her, and then descended to the drawing-room, where our father waited to bid her adieu; and then hastily embracing aunt Gertrude, drove off with the Count, amid the hearty cheers of her friends.

Aunt Gertrude wept bitterly; tears were a great luxury to her, and she quite rejoiced in an opportunity of indulging in them, and loved being petted and consoled; so I gave her over to the ministrations of some sympathizing friends, and, aided by Doctor Warrenne and the best-man, had my father carried back to his own apartment. The excitement and fatigue had begun to tell on him, and the doctor looked anxious, and for some time sat with him, while I returned to the drawing-room to attend to the now departing guests.

"It was imprudent his coming down, Lois. Why not tell me he intended to do it?" said Doctor Warrenne; a few hours afterward.

"I knew nothing of it till I saw him in the drawing-room," I answered. "Alida and Gaston managed it. It was quite a surprise to me when I found him down-stairs. You do not think it will make him seriously ill again, do you?"

"I hope not," he replied; "but it would have been far better for him to have avoided

the excitement. Keep him quiet. He is in bed and asleep now. Don't let him see any one for a day or two, and don't let your aunt, even, talk to him much. I'll call in early to-morrow morning, Lois. Now good-by, my dear."

"Have you any news of Claude?" I asked, as he left the room.

His face fell.

"None, my dear; not a line. It's difficult to get letters now. The last was sent to England, and forwarded to us by a friend there. Heaven knows when we may hear again!" he added, in a desponding tone, and hurried away, and I returned to my father's room, with a heavy heart.

He was sleeping—a dull, heavy, lethargic sleep; and after remaining an hour beside him, I softly left the room, and went to talk the day's events over with aunt Gertrude.

Everything, according to her, had gone off beautifully; such a couple as Gaston and Alida had never been seen before, and the breakfast was just perfect.

"I wish dear Claude had been here," she ended by saying; and the words were hardly out of her mouth when Doctor Warrenne entered, with a pale, anxious face.

"What is it?" I cried, breathlessly.

"Sad news, Lois," he replied, in a faltering voice. "Claude, our poor boy, has been desperately wounded, and is a prisoner!" And he pointed to a paragraph in a German newspaper he held in his hand.

"Is it really true?" I asked, in a hollow tone, my trembling lips almost refusing to frame the words.

"Yes; too true, I fear!" he replied. "See! it is a Government report! Oh, Lois, pray Heaven that our boy may be spared to us—that he may not die!" And the good man buried his face in his hands, and groaned aloud.

I took the paper hastily from his hand, and read the terrible report.

Yes, it was but too true. There was no room left for doubt. In a desperate engagement with the French, now nearly three weeks ago, Claude had been wounded and made a prisoner, and was now in a little frontier fortress in Alsace—a captive in the hands of his foes.

The shock was a terrible one to us all, and aunt Gertrude burst into a fit of weeping.

"Poor boy! poor Claude!" she sobbed. "Oh, Doctor Warrenne! this is a terrible piece of news indeed! How will his poor dear mother bear it? The news will be too much for her."

"Josephine has a brave heart though a weak body," replied Doctor Warrenne, gravely; "but for all that I dread the telling of it to her. She is very weak, poor thing." And he sighed deeply.

"Shall I go to her?—can I help you?" asked aunt Gertrude, eagerly.

"You are a kind creature—a good soul, Miss Gertrude," replied the doctor, taking her hand. "But no; I must do my duty, and break it to her as gently as I can; she will feel it terribly. Claude is our only one, you know, and she is wrapped up in him." And his voice trembled as he spoke.

"Can I be of use?" I asked, in a faltering voice; for I could scarce restrain my tears.

"Yes; not to-night, though," he replied. "Come over to-morrow, Lois, and talk to her, and comfort her. She loves you, and the sight of you will be good for her. Yes, come to-morrow." And with a sorrowful "Good-night," he left us.

The poor pale invalid received me in her bed-chamber next morning. I saw how deeply she was suffering, and strove to cheer her; but my own heart was sore and heavy. I believe, however, that my visit did her good. She saw how truly grieved I was for her and for Claude, and together we talked of him; and she told me stories of his early days, of his childhood and boyhood, and of what a joy, and comfort, and treasure he had always been to her. And then we speculated on the future of the war, and how soon it would be over; and

I think I left her a trifle easier in her mind as to Claude's fate.

CHAPTER VII.

THE EMPTY CHEST.

FOR more than a week after Alida's marriage, my father's state of health was very unsatisfactory, and we feared that a second attack might follow on the exertion and fatigue he had undergone; but after awhile he rallied, and in three weeks seemed nearly restored to his usual health. I and aunt Gertrude had nursed him carefully, one or other of us having been, for the whole of the three weeks, always in his room; and when our patient had recovered, we were glad to be able to take a little rest.

We had heard from Alida several times during my father's illness, first from Rouen, then from Paris. The letters were, just like Alida's epistles always were, full of her own adventures, feelings, and wants, but giving little information or idea of what was really going on about her; however, they appeared to be written in good spirits, and the bride seemed to be enjoying herself. She did not say much about her husband—not so much as I should have expected, for she had seemed so wrapt up in him; but that did not surprise me much, for had she not herself to write about, and did not she know that we cared much more to hear about her than about Gaston?

Her third letter, however, did surprise us, for it announced, somewhat curtly, that she and her husband were leaving Paris for England, and expected to be in London ere her letter reached us. Strange! Though Gaston spoke English so well, we had never inquired if any of his relations were English, and he had never given us to understand that he had any friends in that country. What could have made him alter his plans so suddenly, and go to London, (which at this season of the year, would be empty), instead of proceeding, as had been arranged, to his own estates in the South of France? Alida gave no reason for this change, but simply mentioned that they were starting at once for her native land.

About a week after this letter reached us, we received a long and important-looking communication from my father's lawyers. He chuckled with quiet satisfaction to himself as he read it.

"Ah, Lois! it is about Deerhurst. They threaten to foreclose, it seems, the rascals! They don't know I am ready to pay off their claim at once. Ten days they give me! Well, I'll wait a week, and then I'll pay them, Lois. It's all there—it's all there."

And he nodded toward the chest, and laughed gently to himself.

"Won't you begin to make some arrangements about sending the money home, papa?" I asked, doubtfully glancing at the old chest.

"Arrangements, child? Easily done, Lois, my dear. Don't you trouble your little head about that. The old man is not such a wreck yet but that he can manage a little affair like that for himself. We'll just write a line to Heal and Elliot, my love, and tell them to inform Messrs. Cutcliffe and Price that the money shall be forthcoming in ten days—in ten days; but not a moment sooner. They shall have it exactly on the day they've named themselves, the miserly curs!"

"And then, I suppose, we shall all go back to the old place at once, father?" I said, smiling.

"Ay; why should we stay here any longer, my dear? I'm sick of this horrid little place. Ah! I shall feel like myself again when back in the grand old Hall at Deerhurst, looking over my own park and estates. What a change it will be for us all, Lois—eh?" he said, with a glad look in his eyes that I had never seen there before; and then it faded away, and he added, "Your poor mother, dear, how she would have rejoiced to see this day! But it was not to be for her, poor soul—not for her!" and he sighed heavily. "We shall see Alida

and Gaston again soon. I shall be glad to welcome Gaston in my own house, and show him what an English gentleman's mansion should be, Lois," he added.

"How well Gaston speaks English, father. Where did he learn it?" I asked.

"Learn it! how do I know, child? What odd questions you ask, Lois! But now you mention it, he does speak with a wonderfully good accent for a foreigner. A clever fellow, my dear; all he does he does well. Now write to those rascals of lawyers, dear, and tell them they shall have their money—and much good may it do them, the rogues!"

"But it isn't their fault, father, is it? Who lent the money?" I asked.

"Ah! a rich fellow enough," replied the father, evasively. "I—I really forget the name; but, of course, it's their fault—the lawyers' fault, Lois; they manage the client's business, and advise him how to act, be sure; they've set him to do this."

"But there is no need to write an angry letter, is there?" I asked.

"Yes, yes; give it them well, Lois! I'll dictate, if you like; you can't say too much," he replied.

"But their former letters," I began. "Why did—"

"Their former letters! I tell you this is the only letter I have had, Lois. Do you think I should not have answered their letters if they had sent any? No, no; believe me their former letters are all a myth," he replied, quite put out by my questioning him.

"Well, father, we have never lost letters before," I replied, dubiously.

"So it was our turn now," he replied. "Will you write, Lois?"

"Certainly, papa," I replied, not liking to vex him by any more remonstrances, though I saw, from the tone of the letter, that our lawyers were much annoyed at having received no answers to repeated former communications; and I sat down, and wrote, at papa's dictation, a short, sharp, and business-like note, to the effect that on such and such a date the money would be ready for them.

As I read their letter again, it appeared strange to me that my father, who generally informed us of any letters received from his lawyers with an air of great importance and enjoyment, had never mentioned these former communications to any of us; but he looked flushed and excited, and as Doctor Warrenne had warned us to keep him quiet, I let the subject drop, and forbore to question him on this (to me) curious point.

Added to the fatigue and worry I had suffered on account of my father's illness since Alida's marriage, was the wearing anxiety on Claude's account, with which my heart had been filled.

Not a word, not a line concerning him had reached us; and often on my sleepless bed I pictured him to myself, lying alone and uncared for in some wretched frontier prison, neglected, dying, perhaps even ill-treated, and without even the power of communicating with his friends; and then the still bitterer thought would force itself on my mind, that perhaps he was dead—might have been dead for days, or weeks even; that there was no Claude, no love, no future left for me!

Ah! it was a sad time, and we suffered terribly. Doctor Warrenne's grave face was graver and sadder than ever, and his tall figure seemed bent, and his gray hair white with care, and his delicate wife pined for her son—her only son—in the solitude of her sick-chamber, which she now never left. Yes; I had friends and companions in trouble all around me, and the churches were daily and nightly filled with women praying for their husbands, and sons, and brothers fighting far away in that sad and terrible war that a few short years ago desolated France.

Nearly a week had elapsed since the letter from the lawyers arrived, and my father had never in conversation reverted to the subject of Deerhurst; but, from words he let drop

now and then, I knew it was never far from his thoughts.

One day I had left him alone in his room for the first time for many days, when, as I sat by the table writing, I heard his steps slowly cross the room overhead, and then, stop beside the bed, and then followed the noise of the treasure-chest being slowly and with difficulty dragged out from its hiding-place. Then there was a pause, then a cry, a groan, and a heavy fall.

I started up; and, followed by aunt Gertrude, rushed up-stairs to the room.

What a sight met my gaze! My father lay prone on the floor, stricken again by paralysis. The chest was wide open, and empty, save for the presence of a few old-fashioned, weighty volumes and an old carriage-rug or two, which my father had been accustomed to keep along with his treasures.

We had been robbed; but by whom?

I thought nothing of the money loss, but rushed to my father's assistance; and, with the servants' help, raised him from the ground, and laid him on the bed; while aunt Gertrude sent in all haste for Doctor Warrenne, and I wrung my hands in an agony of alarm, and grief.

Paralysis, brought on, doubtless, by the shock of finding his money gone, had seized him, and he might never recover—never speak or move again.

Gradually, as the first burst of grief and terror passed away, and I was able to think a little, a feeling of intense indignation filled my breast when I thought of the cruel wrong that had been done my father. How he had toiled, and saved, and planned for years past: and now how, at the eleventh hour, the fruit of all his care had been rudely torn from his grasp; and I looked at his gray hair and his still, drawn face as it lay on the pillow, and sobbed aloud.

Who had done it? Who could have discovered where the poor old man hid his money? Who could have contrived its removal, and carried out their plans so successfully?

Only once, for years, had my father left his room, and that was on Alida's wedding-day.

On that day, then, the robbery must have taken place.

A dark, hideous thought flashed through my mind; but I put it away from me. No; it could not be! I would not think such a thought again; and yet—

The days passed on, and my father never rallied. The day on which the money was to have been paid for Deerhurst was over. We could not pay it now. Deerhurst was ours no longer.

Well, for that I cared little in comparison with the state of my father's health, which, Doctor Warrenne did not attempt to conceal, was most critical.

Of course we made every effort to discover who had robbed us, and of course in vain. Three weeks, and perhaps more, had elapsed since the money (all gold) had been carried off, and no trace of the robbers.

Well, I felt that that would be of secondary importance to me, if my father were only spared; but it seemed as if I were likely to lose him as well as my fortune.

We were all—that is, I, Doctor Warrenne, and aunt Gertrude—sitting around his bed one evening, when a strange and sudden change came over his features. His eyes, before glassy and fixed, recovered their intelligence—the drawn features their mobility; and feebly he signed to me to come close to him.

I bent over him.

"Lois," he whispered, "I am dying! You have been a good daughter to me, dear, and I have been a trial—a great trial—to you; and now I have lost your fortune, or the greater part of it!"

"Don't think of that, dearest father!" I replied, kissing him. "We have enough left to live on."

"But Deerhurst is gone—is gone!"

And he gave a piteous moan, as if that fact for the first time had dawned on him.

"Don't mind, darling papa!" I said soothingly. "We shall be happy here without."

But he shook his head.

"Happy?—never!" he murmured.

And then he talked wildly and incoherently for a time, and Doctor Warrenne looked very grave.

"I fear he will not last long, Lois!" he whispered. "The end is very near!"

A deep sob burst from my laden breast as he said the words; but I controlled myself, and watched with him till midnight beside my father's dying bed.

At midnight he woke from a short doze, and looked uneasily around.

"Lois," he said, "where are you?"

"I am here, dear father!" I answered, taking his hand.

"Deerhurst is gone!" he murmured. "I shall die, and be buried in a foreign land! And Alida—where is she?"

"With her husband. Have you forgotten she is married?" I said, gently.

"Oh, ay!—married to Gaston de Rouville! Lois, do not desert Alida! She may want you. Do not forget her. Go to her if she ever sends for you—if she ever stands in need of you! Poor Alida! Take care of her! Say good-bye to her for me!"

And then his mind wandered again. He talked of years gone by—of the days of his childhood and youth—of friends long ago cold and dead—of names and places known only to himself—of long past events of which we knew nothing; and as the early light of morning gleamed in through the half-closed shutters, and the birds chirped gently in the trees outside the windows, and the early breeze bore the sound of the rolling billows of the not far distant sea to our ears, a sweet smile spread over his wan face, he breathed our mother's name in a tone of glad surprise, and, with a gentle sigh, his spirit fled.

With a bitter cry of exceeding grief, I fell on my knees beside the bed.

He was dead, and I alone in the wide world—an orphan!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GOLD STUD.

THE next few days passed like a dream. Aunt Gertrude and Doctor Warrenne managed everything, and I obeyed them like a little child. I was stunned by the blow that had fallen on me, and at first seemed fit for nothing.

The first thing that aroused me was a letter—a curious letter—from Alida, that set me wondering and thinking.

Ah! if it had only reached us sooner it might have soothed the bitterness of our father's last moments, for Alida wrote us great news.

Her husband had bought Deerhurst Park!

And our father was dead, and would never know it!

Now that I had learnt Alida's address I must write and tell her of our sad loss.

"Oh, if he had but been spared a few days longer!"

Alida wrote thus:

"DEAR LOIS: Was I not right in saying that Gaston is the best of husbands, and the kindest, most thoughtful of men? We arrived in London a week ago, and by chance Gaston heard from his lawyer that Deerhurst Park was for sale. On inquiring, he was told that papa had been unable (as I always said he would be) to pay even the interest on the mortgages, and the mortgagee (I forget his name) had decided to foreclose, and the estate was for sale. Thinking to please us all, my husband at once bought the old place, and we are going down there next week to take possession. Tell papa this. I think he will be glad to know that our son (if we ever have one, that is)—his grandson—will some day be the owner of the old property. I can't write to father to-day; I've no time. We are just going to dine with the De Villecourts, whom you may remember our meeting at Trouville last year," etc., etc.

So Gaston had bought Deerhurst, and our father was dead and could never know it! Poor father! And yet what did it matter now?

I read the letter over once or twice again, and almost hated myself for finding that, spite

of all my efforts to exclude it, a vague, uncomfortable feeling of suspicion would creep into my mind—a doubt as to the means by which Gaston de Rouville had become the possessor of our property, and a strong repugnance to the idea of his being its master.

Alida was evidently delighted at the arrangement—and perhaps naturally so; but, if our father had lived, I doubt if he would have rejoiced over it as much as she seemed to imagine.

But what did it all matter now?

I sat down, and wrote a sad note in reply to my sister's joyful letter. It was many days before I got a reply, and when I did was struck by a certain coldness and want of feeling, as well as a curious constraint in the manner in which Alida expressed herself that both surprised and shocked me. Well, Alida was always selfish, I thought, but she might have sympathized with me a little more; and for half an hour or so I sat, with her letter in my hand, staring vaguely at the date, and "Deerhurst Park," written at the top, in my sister's small, delicate handwriting.

My father was buried, two days after his death, in the little Protestant burial-ground; and aunt Gertrude and I were left alone in the St. Eustache House. I thought of a year ago, when De Rouville had been carried insensible into the house. What changes had come about in that short time! My father dead; Alida married; Claude a prisoner of war, Gaston my brother-in-law; and aunt Gertrude and I the only ones left in our poor little house, once so cheerful and full of mirth. The place seemed very dreary now, and had it not been for the Warrennes, I think I should have left it at once.

We had returned, too, to our old quiet way of living; for I was no longer an heiress, though, thank Heaven, not a beggar, neither: but five thousand pounds was all that remained of my fortune—all that I had left to live on, and we were obliged to be careful. But, as the autumn passed away and winter set in, I noticed that something was amiss with aunt Gertrude; she was fidgety and unsettled, and far from cheerful.

"What is it, auntie?" I asked her, at length. "Nay, tell me! You are not happy! What is it?"

"Ah, Lois!" she replied; "you will think me very silly, my dear; but since your father died, and all these changes have taken place, I can't endure—I positively detest—Honfleur. Why don't we leave it, child, and go to England? Your sister is there, and—"

"And why do we not go to her? Is that what you mean, aunt Gertrude?" I interrupted.

"Yes, my dear; why not?" she asked, earnestly.

I was silent. My one objection to returning to England was that I should be *obliged* to visit Deerhurst Park, our old home, and see Gaston de Rouville its lord and master.

"It is the old story, aunt," I said, after a pause. "I could not bear to see strangers—to speak the truth, Gaston—in my father's place."

But aunt Gertrude was far from sympathizing with me. What could be more natural than to see Alida the mistress of Deerhurst, and to take my proper position in the county as her sister?

"Believe me, dear, it is your duty. You are wasting your life in this dull little French town, where you see no one from month's end to month's end," she continued.

Ah, it was of my future aunt Gertrude thought. She had not discovered then how it was between Claude and me.

I said no more at the time, nor for many days; but a month or two afterward I got a letter from Alida, written in a style so unlike her own—a letter through which there ran an under-current of such distress, that I resolved to leave Honfleur, and return to England, if but for a time.

"Come to me, Lois," wrote Alida; "I want you sadly. I am ill and lonely. If you ever loved me, come to me at once. Do not refuse my request; you little know what need I have of you."

It was beginning, then—the trouble I had long ago felt would follow Alida's marriage. She was miserable, suffering, and had not been married a year!

Aunt Gertrude was delighted when I told her I had had a pressing invitation from Alida to go and stay with her at Deerhurst, and that I had accepted it. The little woman could hardly contain herself for joy.

"And what will you do, dear auntie?" I asked; for Alida had not included *her* in the invitation, which I deeply regretted.

"Do, my dear? Go back to my own dear little village; to the little house I and your dear mother lived in when we were children, and where I have so many old friends. Don't think of me, dear; I shall only be too happy to go, but I never would have left you alone in a foreign land, Lois." And, for the first time, I felt how the good soul had given up her own comfort and wishes for mine, by remaining so long with me in France.

Well, then, the St. Eustache House had to be given up; and the old familiar rooms, which I had known and loved from a child, and which were full of associations for me, left empty and desolate.

Aunt Gertrude and I began the process of packing up and arranging matters at once, and in a week's time all was settled, and the house completely dismantled.

The evening before our departure, for the last time, I went round the house, and, coming to my father's room, seated myself on the old oak chest to whose keeping my poor father had been wont to confide his money; and then my eye was caught by the glitter of gold in a deep crack between the boards of the floor, just where his bed had stood. Carelessly I stooped and looked, and, lying within the crack, I saw a small gold stud, set with a shining stone. In another moment it was in my hand. It matched the cross Gaston had given Alida on their wedding-day, and was one of the studs he had worn on that morning.

A sudden crowd of suspicions, so black and terrible that my brain went whirling round as they entered it, rushed into my head. How came the stud there? And then, in another moment, I threw them off, and reproached myself for my evil thoughts. Had not Alida told us that Gaston and his servant had carried my father down-stairs to the dining-room?

Yes; but the crack in which I had found the stud was under the bed; the other portion of the room was carpeted. How did it get there? And again a great horror settled on me, and I hid my face in my hands, trying to shut out the conviction that would force itself on me in spite of my endeavors to chase it away.

Slowly and thoughtfully, and with a heart filled with a great dread, I rose and left the room, and, going to my traveling-bag, locked away the tell-tale stud in my purse. But, even then, I only guessed part of the truth.

I now found it harder than ever to endure the idea of being, even for a time, the guest of my brother-in-law; but I remembered my dear father's dying admonition—"Do not desert Alida; go to her if she wants you," and I summoned up my courage, and resolved, spite of all, to carry out my intention of visiting her.

Why had my father given me such a command? Had the near approach of death lifted a veil from his eyes, and, at the last moment, given him an insight into the character of his daughter's husband?—or why had he begged me to take care of my sister?

Well, I would do my best, come what might; and in spite of my discovery of the stud, and my only too vivid remembrance of the scene in the orchard that May morning, I started for England with aunt Gertrude, and saying good-bye to her at Littlehampton, took train, and, before many hours, was at my journey's end.

CHAPTER IX.

AT DEERHURST PARK.

ALIDA'S grand carriage and pair, with its liveried servants, and coat of arms emblazoned on the doors, met me at the Ayleston Railway

Station; but neither Gaston nor Alida were there to welcome me.

How strange it seemed to be driving along the half-forgotten roads that I had not traversed since I was a child of six or seven years of age; how little the country had altered; and I, how changed I was!

Here was the pond, fringed with bullrushes, and overhung by sweeping horse-chestnuts, where Alida and I used to slide in winter with the vicar's children; here the cottage where the sick girl lived whom I remembered visiting with my mother, and taking fruit and flowers to from the Park gardens—could the tall, florid woman standing beside the gate be her?—and here was the keeper's cottage; and there— And then we drew up at the lodge gates, and I looked out, half expecting to see old Matthews, the lodge-keeper of my young days, open the gate; but a dark-eyed, foreign-looking woman, with an ill-tempered, handsome face, came out, and sulkily did the office, and in a moment more we were driving up the old elm avenue I remembered so well, and across the park; and on either side of us we saw the deer peeping from behind the bushes and brackens, or scampering off in herds at sound of the carriage wheels, as they had done years ago.

Ah! how many a half-forgotten scene of my childhood did each turn in the road bring back to my mind as I leaned forward eagerly to catch the first sight of my dear old home—mine, alas! no longer now!

A sharp turn brought us in sight of the house, lying nestling in a bend of the hill, and backed by a magnificent wood of well-grown forest trees.

Tears came into my eyes as I gazed on it once more after so many years; and my heart beat quick as we drew up at the well-remembered door, and I jumped out of the carriage, and entered the hall.

A gorgeous footman took my shawl and traveling-bag; while another ceremoniously led me to the drawing-room. The Countess was expecting me, he said; the Count had been obliged, by unforeseen business, to go to the neighboring town, but would be back in an hour's time. Then he opened the door, and I stood again in my sister's presence.

She rose quickly from the couch on which she had been seated, and advanced toward me with outstretched hands and a hurried footstep; then the hands suddenly fell, the gait became slow and stately, and Alida coldly embraced me, and in low, measured tones, asked after my health.

But, Alida! Could it really be Alida? I thought, as soon as I got a good look at her face. Yes; Alida it was. But how greatly altered!

Thinner, paler, graver, with a careworn face, and half-frightened, half-suspicious eyes; older-looking by several years, it seemed to me, rather than by several months, since I had last seen her. Such was Alida after her short experience of married life.

My looks expressed my astonishment.

"You don't think me looking well, I suppose, Lois?" she said, in an unsteady voice. "I have been ill—very ill, in fact; but now that you are come" (and I observed the tears which she in vain tried to force back, filling her eyes), "I shall soon get well."

And, almost timidly, and looking round the room with a searching glance, she kissed me again, this time more warmly.

I was shocked—nay, frightened—as I looked at her. One thing I could see as plainly as if it had been written in letters of fire on her forehead—Alida de Rouville was a wretched, heart-broken woman.

"You never told me you were ill, dear!" I said, taking her white hand, loaded with rings, in mine. "Why did you not tell me so, and I would have come to you before? What was it, Alida?"

"Oh, nothing, Lois! Gaston (you know what men are; they don't understand women's ailments) would have thought me foolish if I had

written to you about it, so I said nothing; and, indeed, I am better now, much better!" And she smiled a dreary, wintry smile. "Did you see Gaston at the station, by the by?" she added.

"No," I answered; "and your servant told me just now that he had gone to Downton."

"To Downton?" she answered hotly. "Why, he told me—" And then she paused, and added, hurriedly, "Oh, yes! I remember now—of course I was forgetting. Come, Lois, let me show you your room, dear; it is not far from my boudoir; so we shall be near neighbors. Do you remember the old house, Lois?"

"Remember it, Alida?" Ah, so well!" I replied; and looked round the room, scarcely altered from the time I was last there save, that the massive old furniture looked a shade more venerable, and numerous modern nicknacks and ornaments—Alida's properties—lay scattered about here and there.

She led the way up the broad old staircase, along the picture-gallery, and across the house, till she stopped at the door which opened into what in our childish days had been our nursery.

"I have put you here, Lois; I thought you would like it," she said, in a sad tone. "The room has been scarcely touched, only the furniture moved since we occupied it so long ago. See! here is my boudoir!"

And passing through a long, narrow closet, which in my childhood I had always dreaded, and never entered but with superstitious fear, she ushered me into a small, square room with an oriel window at one end, in which I remembered our dear mother had been accustomed to sit.

For a few minutes we stood together in silence, looking across the park to the blue hills in the distance, behind which the sun was setting. Suddenly there was a loud ringing at the door-bell. Alida started, and turned pale.

"Gaston," she said. "Away to your room, and change your dress quickly, Lo. I must go to meet him; he is very exacting, dear, and likes me to be in waiting for him when he comes in from riding."

And pushing me toward the door of the closet, she fled, rather than ran, from the room.

I sat down in my own apartment in amazement unspeakable, and tried to collect myself, for I was utterly bewildered and thunder-struck.

As I looked up, I beheld the eyes of Alida's French maid fixed on me with a curious expression, which said, as plain as words could speak, "Is it not so?—is not madame changed?" And I trembled to think of what a life she had been leading, and might yet have to lead.

When I entered the drawing-room, dressed for dinner, I found Gaston standing before the fire, and Alida sitting beside it.

He advanced and greeted me with the greatest cordiality, welcoming me warmly to his house, and concluding his speech by kissing me, in brotherly fashion, on the cheek, a proceeding I inwardly resented in no small degree.

Alida, I saw watched us with a jealous eye, and an expression of face I could not exactly comprehend.

At dinner, Gaston talked much and excitedly; gave me a long account of the buying of Deerpark; appealing to Alida every now and then for confirmation of his statements, which she gave in a dull, cold, constrained way, which annoyed him, for he began jokingly talking to me about her, and at her, in a manner most disagreeable to me and offensive to her.

I saw her temper rising, and strove to stop him and smooth matters, but in vain; and in a moment more, Alida had started from her seat with a half-choked exclamation of vexation, and then, bursting into tears, had turned and left the room—Gaston following her retreating figure with a scornful, sneering glance, and uttering a cold, sarcastic taunt as she crossed the threshold, that made my blood run cold, and then his manner changed completely.

"Poor Alida!" he said, in a grave tone. "She is terribly excitable, Lois. You must help me, my dear, to manage her. These bursts of passion are wearing her away to nothing."

I looked at him keenly, resolved to keep my temper, and, if possible, not to show what I thought of his conduct.

"Alida looks very ill, Gaston," I replied. "I was struck with the change when I arrived. You should be very gentle with her. What has been the matter?"

"I don't know, Lois," he answered, with one of his strange, inscrutable smiles, and an evil look shot for a moment from his eyes. "She is very strange at times; but *you*, my dear, will set us all to rights. I quite reckon on you, Lois; you are always to be depended on!"

And he sighed; and, deeply troubled, I rose, and returned to the drawing-room.

I found Alida seated on the sofa by the fire, her face buried in the cushions; and, kneeling down, I threw my arms around her.

"What is it, dear?" I whispered.

For a moment she did not answer; then, with a mocking laugh, she started up, and, putting me aside, exclaimed, "Lois, what a fool you must think me—what a weak, doting idiot—to be angry, and care so much for a few sharp words; but"—and her voice fell to a low, plaintive tone—"I loved him so—I loved him so!"

"And he loves you, dear!" I said, soothingly.

She turned, and faced me, her every feature quivering with pain, grief, and excitement.

"Loves me!" she cried, in a bitter tone.

"Loves me! He hates me, Lois! Oh, Heaven help me! I am, indeed, a miserable woman!"

And, in an agony of grief, she threw herself again on the sofa.

I sat beside her in silence, holding her hand, and feeling how powerless I was to comfort such grief as hers.

After a while, she grew calmer; and by the time Gaston's heavy footstep was heard crossing the hall and coming toward the drawing-room, she had fallen back into the same state of apathetic sadness in which I had at first found her.

Gaston gave a searching glance at her and at me as he entered; and as we were both, to all outward appearance, calm, seemed reassured, and fell into ordinary conversation, in which Alida joined in an unconcerned manner, and as if nothing had occurred, and at eleven o'clock Alida and I said good-night, and retired to bed.

I lay long awake, thinking over the events of the evening. The wind sighed drearily around the house; the clock on the tower struck one. I could not sleep. In the distance I now and then heard footsteps, and, after awhile, the slamming of a door; then voices raised in talk; then, I thought, a cry.

I sat up, and listened eagerly, the cold perspiration bursting out on my forehead.

"Could he be such a coward? But, no; not so great a ruffian as that!"

And then all was silent.

CHAPTER X.

REVENGE.

NEXT morning I awoke with a heavy heart, and half wonderingly stared round the once familiar room.

"Was I a child again, or how came I here?—was my life in France a dream?" were my first thoughts; and then I roused myself, and remembered all that had happened; and the faint cry that had reached my ear the night before recurred to my mind, and I rose, and, striving to conceal my anxiety, descended to the breakfast-room.

Gaston was there, calm, polite—affectionate, even. No signs or traces of any disturbance or agitation visible on his face.

I breathed again, but looked around anxiously for my sister.

"Alida breakfasts in bed, Lois," Gaston said,

replying to my look. "Ever since she has been so poorly, she rises late. The doctor has recommended it. I hope you have slept well?"

"Pretty well—yes, very well," I replied, hurriedly, as by his desire I took the head of the table, and began to pour out the tea. "What doctor does Alida consult?"

"Oh, a friend of mine from town," he replied—"a very clever fellow. Don't fret yourself about her, Lois; she is not seriously indisposed. It is her nerves that are out of order, he says. Dear me! what troublesome, rickety things women's nerves are! What a happy thing it is, Lois, that you are not troubled with them! I shall never forget the courageous way you behaved the night you and that young Warrenne rescue me from death."

I was silent. His eyes were upon me, and their expression was far from agreeable.

"I will go to Alida now," I said, after a few minutes had passed. "Perhaps I can help her—"

"No, don't," he interrupted. "I always assist her in the morning, and she would not, I know, like me to resign the office to another; besides, she will not be ready to get up yet. Let us remain here a little longer. Or, stay; get your hat, and come with me into the gardens. We have the loveliest vines you were saw."

So we wandered out into the gardens, and Gaston appeared to have forgotten all about Alida; for the clock struck twelve before he proposed, or, indeed, would hear of, returning to the house; and when we did return, found Alida dressed and seated on the sofa in the drawing-room, looking grave, and white, and miserable.

She cast a searching glance on me as I entered, and greeted me with a cold kiss, taking no notice whatever of her husband, who looked at her with a sarcastic air, and addressed all his talk to me.

Many weeks passed, and daily I saw how wretched my sister's life was made by the man who had promised but a year ago to love and cherish her through life; and felt keenly that I could do but little to help her, and was profoundly convinced that my eyes beheld but a small part of her sufferings—that some terrible secret was weighing on her mind, and that in private she had to endure treatment of which I could form no notion.

How my heart ached for her? How completely I forgave all her little weaknesses and shortcomings, in my yearning desire to help and comfort her; and yet how powerless I was to do so!

One afternoon in October, when the fallen leaves thickly bestrewed the park, and the wind blew fresh and strong, whirling them hither and thither in golden brown clouds, I set off—Gaston being safely out of the house on a shooting expedition with some friends—for a long ramble alone.

Alida seldom or never left the house now, and was daily getting more broken down and helpless, both in health and spirits.

She was expecting an heir to the Deerpark estates, and that fact, far from arousing Gaston's affection for her, seemed to make him treat her yet more cruelly.

"He has no liking for children," she said, bitterly, "and scoffs at the idea of troubling himself as to who shall come after him. 'Let the property go where it will when I am gone; what do I care?' he said, when I first told him of my hopes. 'I don't want any squalling brats about my house.'" And she laughed bitterly, with a hard, sharp laugh.

I walked briskly along till I reached the lodge at the park gates, with the intention of striking off the high road across the moorland, and up to a pine wood on the hill at the other side, from whence a lovely view of the distant sea could be obtained, and where in childhood we had often and often picnicked in the long summer days. As I neared the lodge, the sounds of angry voices fell on my ears—the voices of a man and woman.

I started. Who could these foreigners be, for they were speaking French? And who could the woman at the lodge be, for I heard her joining in the conversation?

I hastened on, but by the time I reached the lodge the voices had ceased, and I saw the woman standing as usual, silent and sulky, at her window.

When she saw me, she looked disturbed, and came out, and contrary to her custom, entered into conversation with me.

I don't think we had ever exchanged a word before; now that she did speak, I at once discovered that she was a foreigner, though she spoke English well and fluently.

"Are you going out alone, miss?" she asked, anxiously. "It is nearly five o'clock, and dusk will soon be falling."

"Oh, I am not afraid," I returned. "The country round about is safe enough, and every one knows me."

She looked uneasy.

"There are some nasty tramps about, miss; folks who have come to these parts for the harvesting. It is hardly safe for a young lady like you to go so far alone. Just now, two men, ill-looking ruffians, passed, and spoke to me. I was almost frightened by them, only I knew Jim and Harry were within call, and a loaded gun in the kitchen."

"Which way did they go?" I asked, feeling sure she alluded to the men whose voices I had heard.

"That way, miss," she replied, and pointed down the road.

"Oh, I am going quite in the other direction," I said. "I shall not meet them."

And, without more words, I slipped through the gate, and walked rapidly in the direction of the moor. I had a kind of feverish longing to find myself on the breezy hill, to drink in the fresh air as it blew from the sea, and to hear the wind sighing among the stiff pine branches.

Soon I stood where my heart desired, and gazed my fill over the beautiful but already darkening landscape, when the sounds of a heavy footstep rustling among the fallen boughs and fir-cones made me start, and recalled the lodge-keeper's warning to my mind, and I hastily turned and sped down the hill. Perhaps the intruder had not seen me, or might not think it worth while to follow me.

But I was speedily undeceived, for scarcely had I half-crossed the moor, when a rough voice accosted me in broken English, and demanded money in a fierce tone.

I turned, and saw a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a thick, black beard, and a rugged, tanned face, standing beside me, and replied to him in French, and gave him half a crown, fortunately for me the only coin I found in my purse.

When he heard himself addressed in his native language, his face changed.

"Do I speak to the—the Countess de Rouville?"

And he pointed in the direction of the Park. I shook my head.

"I am not the Countess," I repeated, "but I am her sister. What do you want with her?"

"With her, nothing; but with the Count" (and he pronounced the words with a savage sneer that did not escape me)—"with the Count I have business."

"Why do you not come to the Park, then? You know where it is."

And I pointed to its tall chimneys peeping forth from among the thick trees in the distance.

He laughed a short, coarse laugh.

"Do you think a fine gentleman like Count Gaston would come out of his luxurious salon to speak to a vagabond like me? No, no: I must meet him here in the open, and say what I have to say to him! Ah! times are changed. Not so many years ago, friend Gaston would not have disdained to shake hands with me; but nowadays!"—and he made a curious grimace. "When will the Count return,

madam? My business is of importance—to me, at least."

"The Count—he is there," I replied, incautiously.

"There!" he cried, with a savage joy. "What, now? That she-devil at the gate told me he was away in London, and would not be back for a month! *Bon soir*, madame; thank you; you have done me a service you little dream of."

And bursting into a loud, boisterous laugh, he turned and left me, walking rapidly back toward the fir-topped hill, the sounds of his laughter being borne toward me by the wind, as I sped swiftly along on my homeward way.

Who could the fellow be? What had I said that could be of service to him? What could he have had to do with a gentleman like Gaston in his early days? A strange fear fell upon me, and I turned round once again to look after him as he strode rapidly along across the rude, desolate moor.

Presently, from a group of firs surrounded by ferns and brushwood, there started up a second figure—a man scarcely less ruffianly looking, as far as the distance would permit me to judge, than the first. And the two entered into eager conversation together, and in a few moments were walking rapidly away toward the hill where I had met the first. The second, I reflected, must have been hid in the brushwood as I passed, and had probably overheard my conversation with his friend, and been observing me when I had imagined myself alone in my favorite retreat among the tall firs.

A strange foreboding of trouble to come stole over me as I watched the two figures disappear in the distance, and then I continued my way to the Park.

At the lodge, I found the French woman standing leaning on the gate, with a gloomy, dark look on her bold, handsome face.

"You had better have taken my warning, miss," she said, quietly; "it would have saved you a fright."

"I am not frightened," I answered, stiffly, for there was a sort of mocking exultation in the woman's tone. "But how did you know I had seen any one?"

"Voices go far these calm, still evenings," she replied. "I heard the sound of voices, and felt sure the men I had warned you against had met you. I—I trust they did not annoy you, miss; they seem a very rough lot, as I told you."

"No; they did not annoy me," I replied, looking into her dark, eager face suspiciously. "It was the Count they wanted to speak to, not me."

"Ah, the Count, truly. When a foreigner settles in England, all the people of his nation who find out his whereabouts wish to see him—to beg from him would express it better, perhaps. You did not tell them where the Count was, did you, miss?"

"I told them he would be back to-night," I answered, coldly.

She started, and for a moment I thought she would have struck me, so fierce a look did she cast at me from her big black eyes. Then she calmed herself, and said, in a low tone, "It would always be better to deny the Count to such people. They can want nothing from him but money, miss."

"Very probably," I replied.

"Then it would have been far better to have told him, as I did, that the Count was away; don't you think so, miss?" she replied, in a trembling voice.

"I've no doubt the Count can look after himself, and take care he is not swindled or cheated by his own countrymen," I answered. "Do you know these people?" I asked, suddenly.

"I?" she cried, with a guilty start. "I, miss? How should I know them?" and she strove to calm her agitation. "They came to ask for the Count, as I told you; and I, as I have also told you, thought it better to send them away for good by telling them that he

was absent. You have judged differently, and maybe you are right; I cannot say. You should know best, being a lady and the Count's sister-in-law." And with a strange, troubled look she turned away and left me, and with hasty steps I proceeded across the park to the Hall, frightened and disturbed in spirit, and starting and trembling at every little rustle in the bushes around me, half fancying I might see the fierce, rough face of my late interlocutor peering out of the brushwood, or from behind some tree, on my way; and felt glad when I arrived at the door of the old mansion, safe and sound once more.

It was past six o'clock when I got back, and I found Alida alone in the drawing-room, looking tired and frightened, with the traces of recent tears on her face. Gaston had returned from his shooting party, it seemed, and there had been a scene of unusual violence between them; but what had been the cause of their quarrel Alida avoided telling me.

Evening fell, the dinner-hour came and passed, and Gaston had not appeared.

"He will not return to-night, Lois," she said; "or, at any rate, not till very late; it is no use waiting. He left me in a terrible state of anger. Some foolish thing I said or did had vexed him. Let us go to dinner alone."

The meal passed almost in silence; neither Alida nor I were in the mood for talking. She was beaten down with sorrow, and I filled with indignation, mingled with terror, for I remembered the words of the Frenchman, and the sinister tone in which they had been spoken, and felt that, should he and his companion come across Gaston alone, it might be the worse for the latter.

Nine o'clock struck; then ten; then eleven; and then the sound of voices in the distance, and the tramp of approaching footsteps was heard, and after that all was still, and we listened anxiously in silence for further sounds, till the door flew open, and a footman, pale with terror, but striving to conceal his agitation, entered, and in a trembling voice announced that a gentleman in the hall desired to speak to me.

I rose, and went out without a word, and in a moment more was clasped in Claude's arms.

"Claude!" I cried. "Thank Heaven! But how did you come here? Ah! what is this? Are you hurt?" And I shrunk back, for his coat was covered with blood.

"No, dearest," he said; "I am not hurt; but I have terrible news for Alida. There has been an awful affair, and Gaston is there dead, and another man, one of his murderers, is dying."

"Ah! the Frenchman!" I cried. And, as I spoke the words, the stretcher on which lay his insensible form was borne into the hall; and behind it followed one on which lay a body, out of which life had been beaten by cruel and repeated blows, and in which it was difficult to recognize the features of Gaston de Rouville.

I turned away with a shudder, but only to encounter an object that terrified me far more than Gaston's disfigured body. Alida stood there, her eyes, opened wide and staring, fixed in horror on the body, and her face of a ghastly whiteness.

"They have found him at last—they have revenged themselves!" she muttered, in a hoarse voice, and fell senseless to the earth.

CHAPTER XI.

ALL KNOWN.

We raised her, and bore her away to her room, and for hours tried in vain to bring her back to consciousness. At length, we succeeded. She moved and spoke once more; but her mind appeared quite unhinged. She stared vacantly round her, babbling foolish nothings like a little child. Well, perhaps it was better so, I thought, than that she should awake to the terrible reality of her position, for I felt we were on the brink of some startling discovery as to her husband's past life.

After a long time I left her, and proceeded

to the room where Claude and the doctor were with the body of Gaston and his dying murderer.

The man was desperately wounded. Gaston's strong arm had inflicted many a blow on his stalwart form, and the last thrust from his dying hand had given him the wound of which he was expiring. Would he revive, and tell us who Gaston de Rouville really was?

As the hours passed on, and he showed no signs of returning consciousness, my heart sunk. I longed and yet dreaded to hear the truth.

At length the ruffian opened his eyes, and looked around.

"A priest!" he muttered. "A priest! I am dying, and must confess my sins!"

"A priest!" replied Claude. "Unhappy man, there is no priest within miles of you. Confess your sins to Heaven, for your moments are numbered!"

A look of terror for a moment crossed the wretch's face, and he moved uneasily.

"No priest! Then I shall die unpardoned! Pshaw! What matters? After a life like mine, what matters how I die?"

"Speak!" I cried, advancing. "Tell us all you know. Try and make some reparation for what you have done by confessing the truth?"

He looked at me with a half-contemptuous, half-puzzled air.

"Some reparation?" he said, turning his eyes toward me. "What do *you* know of my life? You are the lady I meet on the moor. Ha!—as his eyes fell on the form of his victim, and lighted up with a savage joy—"do you speak to me of reparation for *that*—for killing *him*—for ridding the earth of that carrion? No; I did a benefit to humanity—to you—to all—to his wife, above all, maybe—when I killed Gaston Colbert, calling himself Count de Rouville. Ha, ha! A fine count, truly! Son of Jean Colbert, the pork-butcher—head of the band of robbers called the Savage Wolves."

We all started back in amaze.

"He was our chief a year and a half ago," continued the man, his words coming more slowly, and with great effort. "He would have sold us to the police. We left him for dead on a sand-bank in the river when the tide was rising. How he was saved, the fiend, who, they say, takes care of his own, only knows; but he escaped the death he so richly merited, and we were taken and sent to the galleys, one and all. I and another gave our jailers the slip, and vowed to hunt Colbert down, and there he is!"

And, with a last effort, he raised his arm, and pointed toward Gaston's mutilated body.

My blood froze in my veins as I listened; and, after a short pause, the ruffian, seemingly glad to witness our silent agony, continued: "Ah! you think me a villain; but what am I compared to him? Think of the honest men he has murdered—the families he has ruined—the women he has betrayed and abandoned—the homes he has left desolate. Ah, I, ruffian as you think me, am a saint compared with him!"

And, uttering a savage oath, the man closed his lips to open them no more, and maintained a dogged silence till death took him, and breathed his last, with his face turned to the wall, without a groan or struggle.

Gaston Colbert—that, then, was the right style and title of my sister's husband. Gaston Colbert! And, suddenly, with a thrill of horror, I remembered how, years ago, in the days of my childhood, a terrible series of robberies, accompanied by violence, had been the talk of every one, and that a certain Gaston Colbert, or Colpert, as some called it, but who passed under some other name in the country, had been at the head of the band of ruffians who perpetrated them, and that he had escaped from the police a day or two after his capture in some mysterious manner.

Could this man and my brother-in-law be one and the same person? Yes; there could be but little doubt of it. Our presentiment had

been correct. I was right to regret the day I had saved him from the hungry waters of the rising Sienne.

"He died hard, and fought well for his life, Lois," said Claude, in a low voice as we stood beside the body an hour or two afterward. "I was close to the moorland when I heard voices, and cries, and the sound of blows not far off, and recognized the voices as those of Frenchmen; and at once it flashed across my mind that there was foul play, in which, in some way, either as perpetrator or victim he was mixed up. I hastened to the spot, and beheld Gaston, his back against a tree, defending himself from the attacks of two men, both his superiors in size and strength. His left arm seemed broken, and he was bleeding from many wounds, as were his assailants. As I came up, he cried, 'Help!' and the man there gave him a stab at the same moment, which was returned, and they both rolled together on the earth; while the other, alarmed at my sudden appearance, I suppose, took to his heels, and speedily vanished in the distance. Having ascertained that the fellow yonder was too much injured to escape, and that Gaston was dead, I went to the nearest farm for assistance, and brought the two bodies here; and you know the rest, Lois."

"But, Claude, how came you here?—tell me that," I cried, looking into his face with a thankfulness too deep for words. "Ah! if you could know what a fearful time we have passed—what days and nights of watching and misery we have gone through on your account! Tell me about yourself, Claude?"

"It is a long story," he replied. "I have had a hard time of it since I was wounded and taken prisoner. When my wounds were cured, I fell sick of fever, and for many days lay between life and death; and I had almost given up all hope of seeing you or my father and mother again, when, to my surprise, there was an exchange of prisoners made, and I was one of those sent back to Germany. I believe my father made interest for me with one of the princes whom he attended after an accident the prince met, with at Heidelberg, and managed that my name should be prominently mentioned in the exchange list; or else I might still have been an inmate of the miserable little fortress in Alsace, where I was cooped up for so many weary months."

"And how did you know that I was here, Claude?" I asked.

"From my father, child. I returned post haste to France (in disguise, of course), reached Honfleur, found to my dismay that St. Eustache House was empty, saw my father and mother, and the next morning (for France was no safe resting-place for me) took ship for England, and made my way to London, and thence here. What a mercy I arrived just when I did, Lois! Poor, poor Alida! How will she ever get over this awful shock! By the way, I have got my promotion—long ago, darling!"

And he kissed me; and laying my head on his shoulder, I burst into tears.

I was over-excited. My brain was in a whirl. Sorrow, joy, grief, anxiety, indignation, and horror by turns filled my heart. But above all reigned a feeling of supreme thankfulness that Claude was with me once more—that he was safe—spared to us when so many a husband, father, and son lay stretched on the battle-fields of Alsace and Lorraine.

The news of Gaston's murder soon spread far and near; and that the Count de Rouville had been assassinated by two of his countrymen, that one of the miscreants was still at large, and that the unfortunate Countess had gone mad from grief and terror, was speedily to be read in every newspaper.

Here was a tale of horror, sufficient to satisfy the most eager cravings for sensationalism, and to give food for conversation for even more than the traditional nine days; and friends and acquaintances came trooping in from all quarters with inquiries and offers of assistance; and, ere a week was over, Doctor Warrenne was

with us, and his help and advice were of inestimable value in our trying situation.

Gaston was buried in the churchyard of the neighboring town, not in the little church in our village where our forefathers for many generations had been laid; and none save ourselves knew, or ever will know, his true history. No one besides ourselves will ever know that the French burglar and assassin, Gaston Colbert, and Count de Rouville of Deerhurst Park, were one and the same person. Only one wish we had regarding him, and that was that he might soon be forgotten by us as well as by every one else. But to forget is a difficult task.

Day after day for many a week Alida's health gave no sign of improvement. She remained in the same state of mental derangement; and we began to fear it might be so for ever.

Doctor Warrenne was the only one who entertained a confident hope of her recovery. She was expecting the birth of her child in a few weeks, and he thought that the sight of her babe might restore her mind to its normal state.

And so it might have proved had the child lived; but it scarcely breathed; and in a few short hours, and almost ere the poor mother had recovered sufficiently to realize its presence, the little spirit fled.

Alida was perfectly collected and sensible when its little breath ceased; no tears filled her eyes, no cry of grief broke from her, only she looked at the pale, pale face, so like—oh, so terribly like the face of him we would fain have forgotten forever, and the intense anguish which writhed her features will never be blotted from my memory, and in a dull cold voice of despair, she said, "Better so!" And then for many a day she lay silent, insensible almost; and in vain we tried by tender words and acts to rouse her from the state of hopeless despondency into which she had fallen.

But it was not to be; Alida was never to be the same again. Her mind returned, but her health gradually gave way more and more, and it soon became apparent to us all that she was not much longer for this world.

One evening, after I had sat with her for some time alone and in silence, she raised her head from the pillow, and taking my hand, said "Lois, I have a great deal to tell you. I must do so while I have strength. This place—Deerhurst—do you know?"

"Hush, hush! don't speak of it, my dear sister," I said. "I know all."

"You know all!" she cried. "How?"

"By this." And I drew the stud from my purse. "I knew by this afterward."

Alida shuddered.

"You know but half. I found out much by chance, and he, in his rage, told me all; how he had got our father's money; who he was, and why he had married me—for my fortune, as you said that night, Lois! The life I have led since—ah! you can never imagine it; the torture, the agony of remorse I suffered when I heard of my father's death, knowing that my husband's villainy was the cause; the shame, the horror of knowing who he, the father of my unborn child, was—it almost annihilated me! From that hour I have been slowly dying, Lois!"

"But it is over; you will live now, Alida," I said, trying to speak cheerfully.

But she smiled sadly, and shook her head, saying, "Do not think so, Lois. I am dying fast; it is best so—much best; but let me tell you about Deerhurst. Gaston never bought it; it was he, under another name, his true one of Colbert, who, through his agents, lent papa the money on the place. The whole thing was planned beforehand, and a strange chance brought him to the house of his victims, and played marvelously into his hands. He robbed our father, stopped his lawyer's letters, then foreclosed, and so Deerhurst became his own. And—and—"

But she could go on no longer, and, with a heavy cry, let her head fall once more on the pillow, and held her peace.

I sat by her silently. I could say nothing to soothe her grief, it was too terrible and overwhelming. Her proud spirit had been thoroughly crushed and broken, and her best feelings trampled in the dust by the man whom she had chosen for her lord and master. I smoothed her hair, and kissed her poor worn face, as it lay white and wan upon the pillow; and after a while she began to speak again, and tell of her past life.

"I don't know how or when it first was brought home to me that Gaston did not love me, but I discovered it at first very gradually. I think it was in London, when we came over, that I began to see he had tired of me. One night, I remember, he had promised to take me to some theater, and did not return in time; and I sat, ready dressed, waiting for him till a late hour. When he did come I was angry—very angry—and spoke as I felt. He listened calmly, and then replied in that cold, sneering way I became so accustomed to afterward, but which then was new to me.

"It did not suit my convenience to take you out to-night, Alida. I met some friends who had a prior claim on me, and went with them. I have been dancing attendance on you for the last nine months; you can't expect me to go on like that forever. A man must have a little variety sometimes," and he laughed.

"Variety!" I answered. "What would you say if I wanted variety?"

"You? Oh, that is another question; but I dare say you'll make friends in time; or, at any rate, learn to be civil to mine."

"This he said to me—as I well understood—because I had been 'too grand,' as he termed it, with a strange, wild-looking sort of man he had brought in to dinner a few evenings before, and who was so disgustingly familiar with me that I had remonstrated with Gaston for having brought him to the house.

"My temper got the better of me when he said this, and I turned on him furiously.

"He listened, with a look of superb contempt, till I sat down, tired out with anger.

"Then, placing himself beside me, his cruel lips tightly compressed, he hissed out, 'It is time that you and I came to an understanding! If you wish to keep a whole bone in your body, you will keep a civil tongue in your head, and not treat me to another scene like this! Do you know why I married you?"

"And he laid his hand on my arm.

"I did not answer. My head was going round and round; my brain was in a whirl; my lips moved, but I uttered no sound; and trembled as I met the keen, glittering eyes of my husband.

"I married you," he said, slowly, "just because I wanted ten thousand pounds! You poor fool, you! You thought I loved you—that your insipid, blonde beauty had captivated me! No, no! Your little gipsy of a sister there, with her brave heart and black eyes, would have pleased me much better, if I could have got her; but you were beforehand with her, and she had no money when I first saw her, or that charming little person should have stood in your place. However, as it is, you must learn to accommodate yourself to my ways, and, if you cannot be my loving wife, be my devoted servant. Nay, don't start; you are my wife legally—I didn't mean to deny that."

"Ah! if only I were not!" I murmured, the tears running down my cheeks; "if only I were free!"

"What would you do? Go back to Honfleur? For shame, Alida! Be thankful you are my wife, and that I have not robbed you of your money and cheated you in the way of marriage, as I—as a friend of mine did a certain Jeanne de Clichy five or six years ago."

Alida shuddered, and stopped short; then continued:

"Lois, if a shell had exploded in the room, I could not have been more horrified than I was when I heard these words! You don't remember, but I do, the terrible history of Jeanne de Clichy—a young lady who lived

not far from Rouen—who was entrapped into a marriage with some man who proved to be an impostor—whose money was all squandered by him, and she left friendless and penniless to perish with hunger in a distant part of France. She wandered home, and arrived at the gates of her father's chateau, ragged, starving, and half-mad, carrying a miserable babe in her arms. They both died a few days after, but the villain escaped."

"What a wretch!" I exclaimed. "And your husband was his friend?"

"Ay! I thought so then; but—" And she hesitated.

"Well, tell me all!" I urged; and she continued:

"You are the friend of such a wretch as that!" I exclaimed, indignantly.

"He nodded.

"His very best friend! I was only twenty-five when that happened! I got out of it pretty well!"

"You got out of it! What do you mean?" I cried, looking at him in a terrified manner.

"What do I mean? Why do you ask?" he replied, moodily. "What is it to you, I should like to know?"

"Was he the man you brought here to insult me the other night?" I asked, my eyes flashing fire, and the blood tingling in my cheeks.

"Ha! what, poor Jacques Vermont? Ha! ha! hardly. He's a quiet fellow enough when he has not too much champagne."

"Who was he, then?—which of your dear and respectable friends?" I cried.

"Would you really like to know?" he asked, and a devilish glitter in his black eyes should have warned me to asked no further questions; but I was frantic with passion.

"Yes; tell me at once," I replied.

"He got up and bowed low before me.

"It was I!—behold me!" he answered.

"You—you?" I cried, wildly.

"I, and no other. She was a pretty girl, was Jeanne, but with a frightful temper. If she would have behaved like a sensible woman, she might have been alive now;" (and he shrugged his shoulders). "Learn a lesson from her, Alida, and don't treat me to any of your little feminine exhibitions of ill-humor, or your fate may be as hard, if different from Jeanne's."

"You are trying to frighten me," I cried, endeavoring to face him calmly. "I don't believe a word of all this."

"Why, woman, some of the very gems you are wearing there were hers!" And he pointed to the rings on my fingers and the opal cross—his wedding gift, Lois, to me—that I wore around my neck.

"I shrieked with horror, and tore them from my throat.

"Hers?" I cried—"hers? the property of the woman you—"

"But his hand was on my mouth, and his grasp on my arm.

"Silence!" he cried. "Beware what you say. Here!—take these baubles, and put them on again, and learn not to make scenes with me. It won't answer. And now be off—be off to bed, or I warn you that it will be the worse for you;" and he pulled me up from the sofa, and half dragged me to the door; and, trembling with terror, I sought refuge in my own room.

"From that day, Lois, to this, I have known no peace. My heart has been slowly and surely breaking. I had loved him so dearly, so truly. I could not survive seeing my dream of love turn into a reality of terror and hate; to find the man I had looked on as perfect, the vilest wretch that ever walked the earth. From that hour I knew my fate was fixed—that I should die. And, oh! I prayed it might be soon."

"I saw nothing of Gaston for two or three days after this event; and when he did show himself again, he appeared in excellent temper and spirits.

"How are you, Countess?"—a title he always

gave me when in a good-humor. 'I've some news that will please you, I fancy.'

"Indeed!—what is it?" I asked, timidly.

"Deerhurst Park is in the market," he replied.

"What!—papa has not paid; they have foreclosed?" I said.

"Just so. Well, it will be sold by to-morrow," he answered.

"Dear me! What a pity!" I cried, the tears standing in my eyes. "Poor old place! I am so sorry! Your news is not very good news, Gaston, to me," I answered.

"Just like a woman, to cry out before she is hurt," said Gaston, with a laugh. "You have heard but half my news. Who do you think will be the happy possessor to-morrow?"

"I shook my head.

"Who?" I asked.

"No other than myself, the Count de Rouville. I've bought it, Alida. We will make it our head-quarters."

"Oh, how delightful!" I cried, in unaffected surprise. "How came you to hear it was to be sold?"

"My lawyers told me. By the way, one of them will be here to-night. I'll see him in the second drawing-room, Alida; my study is all upside down."

"Very well," I answered; and then he gave me a few further particulars about the sale, and left me.

"That evening I fell asleep in the twilight on the sofa in the drawing-room. I was aroused by the low murmuring of voices in the inner drawing-room, and understood at once that Gaston and his lawyer were there, talking over the purchase, as I imagined, of the Deerhurst estate. I hesitated for a moment whether to rise and leave the room, or to remain where I was; for I did not know if Gaston would approve of my being within earshot while he talked over his private affairs, when a few words caught my ear, and kept me spellbound on my sofa.

"I am to understand then, M. Colbert, that I am to give no quarter—that you are determined to foreclose?"

"Certainly," replied the voice of my husband. "Inform Colonel Clinton at once that if the money be not paid in ten days, the mortgage will be foreclosed."

"Very well, sir; now for the money you brought over," continued the lawyer.

"Oh, the eighteen thousand pounds! Well, invest it in any way you think fit, my dear sir. Get a good interest, for it, though. Deerhurst will take the deuce of an income to keep up."

"What! you intend to live there yourself, then?" said the lawyer.

"Most probably," replied Gaston; "I don't know yet. Well, invest the money as you think best. It's all one to me so long as the interest is good. Settle the Deerhurst affair directly, like a good fellow, though. I want to get it off my mind at once."

"Certainly, M. Colbert—Count de Rouville I mean—I beg pardon!" replied the lawyer. "Now I will say good good-evening. I've kept you late, I fear?"

"Not at all—not at all; I was not going anywhere, and I shall have enough of my wife's company down at Deerhurst in a little while, I fancy." And then they shook hands, and the lawyer departed.

"My heart sunk within me as I saw Gaston quit him at the door, and re-enter the drawing-room. What would he say to find me there, and to know that I must have overheard all his conversation?"

"He lighted the candles on the mantelpiece, and, with an angry oath, spied me cowering in a corner of the sofa.

"How came you here? You have been listening," he said, in any icy voice.

"I have not been listening," I answered; "but I have heard. I was asleep here when you and—I began."

"No falsehood, if you please. If you have not listened, at any rate, you have heard; and,

therefore, could not have been asleep; and, having heard, I have now to consider how I must treat you.' And he walked up and down for a few minutes, thinking. 'Pooh! you are a poor, weak, puny-minded creature, not like Jeanne!' And he laughed. 'You can do me no harm. I defy you! Well, you may as well know who I am at once; and remember, also, I am your husband!' And he stooped, and whispered something in my ear, and I swooned.

"You know what name he whispered, Lois—that man, the wretch who died here, told you. I had married one of the most atrocious villains that ever walked the earth.

"Little by little I learned all about Deerhurst; how he had lent money, through his agents, on it to papa; how he had stopped the lawyer's letters while he was with us at the Maison St. Eustache; how, finally he told me this afterward, Lois, in a fit of rage—he and his servant, who was really one of his old gang, had robbed our poor father of his savings and you of your fortune, and had made me unknowingly assist them in their crime!

"Oh, Lois, it was horrible—horrible! I never held up my head afterward; and the news of his death nearly killed me, for I knew my husband was his murderer; and yet I had to live with him and endure his presence, and obey his whims and caprices. Gradually he began to treat me cruelly. Oaths and threats grew to blows, and my life has been one of fearful suffering and constant terror. That letter I wrote to you, Lois, about the purchase of Deerhurst was forced from me, and I only got leave to ask you here because it suited his whim at the time to have you. He said the house was too fearful with only me in it, and I think he began to fear that if I were left alone I might manage to effect my escape from him. He judged that my pride would never permit me to tell you who and what he was, and he judged rightly. Had you not heard it from his old companion that awful night, nothing would have induced me to confess the degrading marriage into which I had been entrapped.

"And now, Lois, you know the secret of my miserable married life, tell me, do you not think it were best for me to die? Do you now wonder that I could not shed a tear when I looked on my child's—his child's dead face? Was it not the child of an outcast—a murderer? Was not a speedy death the greatest mercy Heaven could send it, for its own sake and ours?"

And she ceased speaking again, and I could only weep silently beside her, and answer her sad question in my own heart in the affirmative. One could not regret the death of the poor little one, who would have been doomed to suffer a whole lifetime for the sins of its father. Alida was right there—it was a mercy it had been taken. But for herself—ah, if only she could forget the past, life might yet be peaceful and happy.

But she could not forget.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER THE STORM.

ALIDA had been left a rich widow; her husband had made no will, and all that he died possessed of passed to her, and his property was large, both real and personal. But I believe Alida found her wealth a burden; for the thought ever haunted her, and often and often occurred to me, by what unrighteous means, by what fraud and violence, it had been acquired! Finally she determined to build and endow a hospital with the greater part of it, keeping for herself only her fortune of ten thousand pounds and Deerhurst. It was a small income to keep up such a large place, and Alida decided to let the Park again—a step that surprised no one; for it was but natural, after what had happened, that she should dislike the spot—and leave the county altogether, to settle in or near London.

She never carried out her plan, however; for, as winter came on, her health gave way

completely, and it was plain to us all that she would not see another spring.

Gradually she faded, growing thinner and weaker each day; and, at last, passed away so quietly that for a while I scarcely knew if death or sleep held her in its embrace. Aunt Gertrude was with me when she died, and Claude and Doctor Warrenne attended her to the last; and soon my sister, the last victim of the cruel villain whom an adverse fate had thrown on our hospitality, reposed beside her child, and among her forefathers, in the family vault of the Clintons, in Deerhurst Church.

Alida, I found, had left me the whole of her property, both in lands, jewels, and money; and, carrying out what I knew to be her intention, I, aided by Claude, built and endowed the hospital she had planned, keeping of the property bequeathed to me only that portion of it which she had meant to reserve for herself.

After all these affairs were settled, I went away quietly with aunt Gertrude and the Warrennes to their old home in the south of England, and in six months after Alida's death became Claude's wife.

Our wedding was a very quiet one. We had both suffered so much and so severely, that, though the day gave great joy to us both, it was joy of a deep and sober sort, and led us to shrink from the gaze of the world rather than to court its notice; so the ceremony was performed in the little village church of Stonyfield, aunt Gertrude and Doctor and Mrs. Warrenne being the only friends present; and, after the ceremony, Claude and I walked arm-in-arm to the little railway-station, and set off for Cornwall on our wedding tour.

A few months before our marriage peace between France and Germany had been proclaimed; and Claude, having been again promoted, had for awhile been obliged to return to his regiment; and then he obtained a long leave of absence, during which we were married, and, at the expiration of it, we returned for a time to Dresden, where his corps was quartered.

Now, however, he has left the army altogether; and the death of a rich relation, who left him a considerable fortune, has enabled us to live at Deerhurst Park once more; and though the old place is fraught with sad memories to us both, yet it is the spot I love best on earth; and I often think that, if the departed knew what is passing in this world, my father is content to see his ancestral home with Claude and I in it, and to hear the happy voices of our children—his grandchildren—in whose veins runs the blood of the Clintons, ringing through the halls and corridors of our dear old home!

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